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ARROWSMITH

NINON DE LANCLOS

BY

EMILE MAGNE

Translated and Edited by

GERTRUDE SCOTT STEVENSON, M.A.

Editor of "The Letters of Madame"



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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	9
Chapter I.	25
Chapter II.	38
Chapter III.	61
Chapter IV.	77
Chapter V.	95
Chapter VI.	124
Chapter VII.	140
Chapter VIII.	171
Chapter IX.	213
Chapter X.	256
Translation of Poetry in Text	283
Portraits of Ninon de Lanclos	287
Portrait of Madame Scarron	289
Works of Ninon de Lanclos	291
Bibliography	293
Index	305

Translations of Poetry printed in French in the text will be found at the end of the book, and the reference numbers printed against the various pieces will enable the reader to find the translation in each case without difficulty.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Ninon . . . . . *Frontispiece*
From a painting attributed to Pierre Mignard.

Facing page

Ninon 66
From an anonymous painting.

Gaspard de Coligny, Marquis d'Andelot . . . 90
From a print by Th. van Morlen.

Saint-Evremond 130
From a print by Gerard Edelinck.

Louis de Mornay, Marquis de Villarceaux . . . 148
From a miniature by Jean Petitot.

Ninon's Tower in the old Château of Villarceaux . 158

Ninon in her later years 212
From an anonymous painting.

INTRODUCTION

I

PROBABLY no woman has ever had so much romantic nonsense written about her as has Ninon de Lanclos. In the earlier part of her life she was an undisguised and unrepentant courtesan, yet she enjoyed tremendous prestige throughout her lifetime, and she remains one of the most interesting and charming personalities, not only of the seventeenth century, but of all time. Considering the magnitude of her fame and the amount that has been written about her, both by contemporary and by later writers, it is surprising that only now has a serious attempt been made to sift the grains of truth from the chaff of fiction. For many years the problem of Ninon de Lanclos's real life has been a challenge to that eminent French writer, Monsieur Emile Magne, who has devoted his life to researches in the history and the manners of France's most brilliant century, *le grand siècle*. Many interesting but little known persons live again in the pages of his brilliant monographs, several of which, such as *Voiture et l'Hôtel de Rambouillet*, *Scarron et son milieu*, etc., have been crowned by the French Academy. Madame de

Villedieu, Madame de La Suze, L'abbé de Boisrobert, La Bruyère, Nicholas Poussin, and Tallemant des Réaux are others about whom Monsieur Magne has written books, while for many years he has been a voluminous contributor to the reviews and newspapers. Many marks of distinction have been awarded to his literary work; and he himself is a chevalier of the *Légion d'honneur*, as well as a wearer of the *Croix de guerre*. His vast store of out-of-the-way historical information, and his picturesque style of writing, make his books enthralling to read, and he can always be relied upon to be painstaking and exact in the matter of disentangling truth from fiction. In his present book, of which this volume is an English version, he has gone to the national archives of France for his facts, and has used only contemporary memoirs and letters which may reasonably be considered reliable. The result is a study which, besides being a model of enlightened and energetic research, bears the stamp of authority. In the French edition Monsieur Magne gives footnote references to his authorities at every stage of the story, but it is unnecessary to include many of these for English readers. His copious bibliography has, however, been reprinted as a guide for those who delight in wandering through the by-paths of that fascinating century, and as a tribute to Monsieur Magne's erudition.

II

Ninon de Lanclos was born in 1620, eighteen years before the birth of Louis XIV. Her parents were a singularly ill-assorted couple. Marie-Barbe de La Marche, her mother, was an obstinate woman of narrow-minded piety, while her father, Henri de Lanclos, was a dashing cavalry officer, handsome, debonair and charming, but a freethinking libertine. These two had long been on indifferent terms with each other, and soon after the birth of Ninon, who was their third child, Henri de Lanclos fell desperately in love with a young married woman. This infatuation involved him in a sea of trouble, and finally led him to commit a murder and flee the country. Ninon was thirteen years of age at the time of her father's flight, and as he had taken great interest in her education, and had early taught her to think for herself, and to evolve a rule of life founded upon the principles of Epicurean philosophy, his sudden and tragic withdrawal from her life, at an age when she was confronted with the problems of adolescence, left her morally and mentally adrift. Her mother was worse than useless as a guide for high-spirited youth and beauty. After a few years of gloom with her mother, Ninon decided for herself her future mode

of life. At the age of seventeen she was already an exceptionally charming and beautiful woman, and admirers had discovered their way to the house where she and her mother continued to live after her father's disappearance. In spite of her mother's optimism, Ninon had to face the fact that without a dowry, and living in the shadow of her father's crime, she could not expect to marry, and, indeed, as Monsieur Magne points out, there is no proof that she ever did receive any serious offers of marriage. Marriage, too, appeared to her as an unequal affair, in which man is encouraged to tyrannise over woman, and for her own career she chose the independence of a man. "Men have a thousand privileges that women do not enjoy. Therefore I shall turn myself into a man," she declared. A proposal which was greeted with amazement.

III

Ninon had had her first love affair even before her mother's death. Carried away by her youthful ardour, and believing all his promises to her, she had given herself to a worthless fellow, Saint-Etienne. Her disillusionment was rapid, and after a few weeks she dismissed him. His place was soon taken by Henri de Lancy, Chevalier de Raré. In the midst of this affair Madame de Lanclos died, and Ninon,

who loved her mother more than might have been supposed, felt the need of solitude in which to think out her future, and sought admission to a convent. For a time she was at peace, then her ardent nature reasserted itself, and she realised that a conventual life was not for her. Returning to her home in the Marais, she threw open her doors to her admiring swains, and at the age of twenty-two definitely embarked upon her career as a courtesan. She cultivated the friendship of Marion de Lorme, the reigning courtesan of the day, and of Madame Scarron, afterwards famous as Madame de Maintenon, and the fame of her beauty and lively wit soon spread throughout Paris. Unlike the rest of the troop of brilliant courtesans, who expected to live like queens, and demanded money and jewels worth a king's ransom, Ninon always hated to take money or presents from her lovers. She took only enough to allow her to live comfortably in a modest house, and dispense simple though widespread hospitality. To the one or two who were permitted at a time to contribute to her upkeep she was not particularly gracious, and they had to be content with her proximity but not intimacy, and to console themselves with the reflection that but for their money they would not be there at all. Every day men flocked to Ninon's house, but they were all men of parts, invited by Ninon herself or introduced by

her friends. They did not need to be physically attractive, but they had to be intelligent, broad-minded, amiable, and to behave with outward decorum. They were not allowed to show their passion in public, and unless Ninon herself called them to her intimacy, they had to behave in seemly fashion among themselves or to withdraw elsewhere. Her nature was constant to the extent that she could tolerate only one lover at a time, but her affection for him was not apt to last longer than a few weeks or a few months at most. She insisted upon her right to choose for herself who should be included among these lovers of a season, and once an affair was over the break was final. The lover might, however, remain in her circle of friends, and it speaks volumes for her great personal attraction and the charm of her intellect that the majority of these discarded lovers did continue peacefully to visit her on terms of amity for the rest of their days.

Lover succeeded to lover, Gaspard de Coligny, the great Condé, Méré, Jarzé, Miossens, and many others, until in 1652 an extraordinary thing happened—Ninon herself fell desperately in love. The object of her passion was Louis de Mornay, Marquis de Villarceaux, a member of an old and proud family, married to a beautiful wife by whom he had four children. Villarceaux was himself a handsome and interesting man, but utterly unscrupulous in his

dealings with women. Ninon loved him passionately, and, at the height of a popularity such as has been enjoyed by few women, deserted all her friends and fled with him into the depths of the country. For three years they lived together in the utmost devotion. A son, Louis-François, was born to them in 1653. Ninon has frequently been accused by later biographers of being entirely devoid of maternal affection. That, however, is part of the fable woven around her by unscrupulous romancers, who are also fond of attributing many other children to her. As there is no proof that any of these children were born, or if born, survived, there is naturally no evidence that Ninon took any interest in them. In the case of Louis-François de Mornay, whose birth is incontestable, his mother saw as much of him in his youth as was fashionable with mothers at that time, and watched over his subsequent career with far more interest than that of many parents.

In 1655 Ninon's passion for Villarceaux was already beginning to wane, when she received from her old friend and counsellor, Saint-Evremond, an admonition in verse complaining of her long absence from the midst of her friends. She began to welcome them as of yore, and her salon was soon more brilliant than ever.

IV

From the days of her childhood Ninon had been a keen student of philosophy, and her whole earlier life was guided by the precepts laid down by Montaigne in his *Essays*. In the Middle Ages the study of philosophy was almost entirely confined to the Church, and did not touch the life of the people, except as expounded by their spiritual leaders. Then came the Renaissance, and the discoveries of a brilliant group of scientists. Tycho Brahe, Copernicus, Galileo and others shattered the old credulity and laid the foundations for a new scientific thought. The Church refused to move with the times, and philosophy and religion became rivals for the mind of the people. Men asserted their right to think for themselves, and the Church denied it, with the result that religion became fanaticism and philosophy secularised. The Church even persecuted independent thought in its own midst. Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at the stake in Rome in 1600, only twenty years before Ninon's birth, was a Dominican monk. The new order of philosophers were thenceforth laymen. Bacon was a judge, Hobbes a private tutor, Descartes a soldier, and Spinoza a grinder of lenses. Philosophy

throve on the change, and in no century was philosophical thought more cultivated. To philosophise became the favourite occupation amongst the hardy souls who dared to brave the displeasure of the religious party. In France it became particularly popular, and every ancient school of philosophy had its cult in seventeenth-century France, while the works of the great living philosophers were eagerly read, openly by the freethinkers who clustered together in the disreputable quarter of the Marais, and surreptitiously at Versailles, where the broad-minded Madame read manuscript copies of the treatises of Descartes and Leibnitz behind the backs of King Louis and Madame de Maintenon.

Modelled on the example of the famous Hôtel de Rambouillet, salons for the exchange of "Thoughts" broke out in numbers, and of these the most famous and exclusive was that held by Ninon de Lanclos in her house in the Marais. Here in her younger days gathered a brilliant array of wits. Princes, noblemen, poets, soldiers and libertines all discoursed amicably together, clustering round their mistress, the "rare and adorable" Ninon, as a similar group had been wont in far-off days to gather round Epicurus in his Athenian garden. Seneca might equally well have meant the house in the Rue des Tournelles when he said, "You come to the gardens where the words are inscribed: 'Friend, here it will be well for you

to abide ; here pleasure is the highest good.' " The form of Epicureanism which appealed most to Ninon herself was that expounded by Montaigne in his *Essays*, a copy of which had early been given to her by her father.

Michel de Montaigne, the gentle and liberal-minded philosopher, whom Saint-Beuve calls " the wisest Frenchman who ever lived," was born at a time when France was ravaged by religious wars and their concomitant " rivers of blood and mountains of dead bodies." In his early days at Bordeaux he had seen many horrible deeds committed in the name of religion, and when in later years his thoughts turned to philosophy, it was the tolerance of Epicureanism which appealed to him—the doctrine of live and let live. In his famous *Essays* he preached moderation, loyalty, truthfulness, tolerance and humanity. While the world was weltering in passions, crimes and fanaticism, he pleaded for good sense, good temper, and good humour, characteristics which Ninon afterwards made the rule of behaviour in her circle. She faithfully practised Montaigne's precepts in her own life, with the result that, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote of her in *Emile*, " She was famed for frankness, straightforward character, her stable nature, her faithful friendship . . ."

V.

It was Ninon's intellectual activity that redeemed her philosophy of life from mere libertinism and licentiousness. Stronger even than her need of physical love was her need of intellectual activity and companionship, and she never cared to mix the two things. Men like Saint-Evremond, Scarron, La Rochefoucauld, Boileau, Molière and many others were her faithful and devoted friends, not her lovers. Mignard, the great painter, used to show her his paintings before allowing anyone else to see them; Molière would read scenes from his plays to her before they were finished, and her drawing-room was always full of poets who wanted to read her their lyrics. Ninon was popular with women too, but, as in the case of men, she would have none who were not intelligent beyond the ordinary. Madame Scarron was the closest friend of her youth, and Madame de La Sablière was an intimate of her later days. In the heyday of her popularity Ninon had constituted herself the apostle of a movement for obtaining a greater measure of freedom for women from the domination of parents and husbands, and she advocated equality of the sexes in marriage. She was in this respect the first of modern women. At first she stood alone in her opinions, but gradually

other women rallied round her, and she became the recognised leader of the *précieuses galantes*. The old *précieuses* of the Hôtel de Rambouillet were scattered. Their ranks had become split and they followed different leaders. The original movement had been the outcome of the revolt of certain delicate souls against the brutality and coarseness of manners resulting from decades of civil and religious wars. In the hotel of the famous Marquis and more famous Marquise de Rambouillet distinguished gatherings of noblemen, poets and men of letters met to converse and read poems and works. Under the guidance of Malherbe they undertook to refine and purify the language. In the matter of manners, respectful and chivalrous gallantry between the sexes was the order of the day, and pompous and elaborate courtesy prevailed. Later the movement became over-refined and prudish, and as a result split into different groups. The largest group collected round Madeleine de Scudéry, the most famous novelist of the time, who also wrote under the pseudonym of Sappho. She was a past mistress of the art of conversation and a serious student of philosophy, which was the favourite study and recreation of the time. In her salon life was modelled upon the figures in her novels, and love idealised to the height of artificiality. Affectation and pomposity replaced sincerity of sentiment. Ninon always hated pedantry and affectation of

any sort, and much fun was made of salons like that of Madeleine de Scudéry among her friends. Molière, too, ridiculed this phase of preciosity in *Les Femmes Savantes*. Many salons degenerated into mere resorts for gaming and gallantry, but in hers she always insisted upon propriety, sobriety and sincerity. Mademoiselle de Scudéry herself wrote a long description of Ninon as a character in *Clélie*, one of her most famous novels, and summed her up as follows :—

" Clarice plays the part of the fascinating charmer and plays it well. Undoubtedly she has one of the most interesting characters in the whole world, and a most powerful personality. . . . In short, it is small wonder that Clarice has gained the hearts of some of the noblest in the land. Men and women, differing as they do in intelligence and temperament, all agree in pronouncing Clarice to be a most charming woman. Added to wit and kindness she possesses countless virtues deserving of the highest esteem."

VI

Monsieur Magne has analysed Ninon's appearance and her character very thoroughly, and has related the story of her amorous adventures in detail, so far as they are authenticated by documentary

evidence. It is enough, therefore, merely to state that while her caprices were very numerous indeed, they did not continue into extreme old age, as legend has it. Her last affair was in her fiftieth year, with the twenty-three year old Charles de Sévigné. The courtesan then retired from the fields of gallantry, and lived on her savings, becoming Mademoiselle de Lanclos to a world which had hitherto called her only Ninon. In this later phase her friendship was more than ever sought after, and she became the arbiter of manners for the whole of Paris. No fashionable young man's manners were considered perfect unless they bore the stamp of Ninon's training. Cultured Englishmen, and a few outstanding women such as the Duchess of Sandwich, besought letters of introduction to her from Saint-Evremond. Christina, the intelligent but eccentric Queen of Sweden, wished to see only two things in Paris, and one of them was Ninon de Lanclos. Her fame penetrated even into the inner circles of Versailles, and King Louis XIV used to ask, "What did Ninon say?" when he was making some change in his household.

When old age began to overtake Ninon she found comfort in a modified form of Stoicism, which, without actually bringing her back to the fold of Christianity left in girlhood, allowed her to look forward to a future meeting with her old

friends, nearly all of whom were already dead. As death grew imminent she prepared for it calmly, and was formally reconciled with the Church, a necessary proceeding in order to obtain decent burial. She died in 1705, at the age of eighty-five years, watched over by devoted friends. The death of Ninon ranked as an historical event, and eulogies flowed from the pens of the greatest writers of the day. Even fifty years later her memory was still green. Horace Walpole was flattered to receive a portrait of her. He says in one of his letters: "Old Lady Sandwich died in Paris the other day; her husband gave me the portrait of Ninon de Lanclos found in the deceased's possession. He sent it to me in very flattering terms. . . ." There was apparently some trouble about the handing over of this portrait, and Walpole writes of his fear of losing it altogether. He also greatly desired to obtain possession of a packet of Ninon's letters to Lady Sandwich. "Just fancy," he says, "what a joy it would prove to me were I able to publish at Strawberry Hill original letters of Ninon. . . . Your Ladyship and myself worship at the same shrine, are of one faith, in fact, where certain saints are concerned. These certainly fill one with more zeal than the more vulgar form of persecution, *i.e.* torture and fire, give to the bigoted flock of their sects. Such a cause as ours would, I verily believe, inspire

even Lady Strafford with ardour. If she will but help us to find Notre-Dames-Des-Amours, I would willingly add Saint Raoul (her ladyship's pet cat) to my calendar."

GERTRUDE SCOTT STEVENSON.

NINON DE LANCLOS

CHAPTER I

HENRI DE LANCLOS, father of the famous Ninon de Lanclos, and lord of the manor of La Douardière, was born in either 1592 or 1593. He belonged to a family of the lesser nobility whose arms are recorded by the genealogist, Réné d'Hozier. He is sometimes described as a gentleman of Touraine, without any further details being given as to his origin; but as a matter of fact the manor of Lanclos appears on the map of Champagne, while that of La Douardière has so far eluded discovery. It is further stated that he was a soldier in the days of Henri IV, and displayed a certain amount of courage on fields of battle, as well as in the country to which he was exiled on account of his too indiscreet language. Ninon's biographers, who were also her lovers, might be expected to attempt to glorify her father's career. Henri de Lanclos was, at the time of the death of Henri IV, only seventeen or eighteen years old, an age at

which a military career can hardly have begun. More trustworthy witnesses agree, however, that during his youth, which was certainly dissipated, he showed signs of a taste for literature and music, and preferred independence and adventure to discipline and routine. As a young man he played the lute exceptionally well, and is said to have joined, for some unknown reason, the fraternity of strolling minstrels whose ranks contained gaol-birds and wastrels of all sorts.[1]

His vagrancy was not of long duration, and he soon began to realise that he was jeopardising his whole future by frequenting such society. It appeared to him that life would be more agreeable in the household of some great nobleman. He had a pretty wit and a mind garnished with the fruits of intermittent study; he loved pleasure, and was troubled with few scruples; he was, moreover, a sceptic, adhering closely to the doctrines of Epicurus and Pyrrhon and practising their precepts. He

[1] The date of Henri de Lanclos' birth, taken from unpublished legal documents, makes him thirty-nine and forty years old respectively in July and December, 1632 (*Archives nationales* X. 2 B. 1198). The Lanclos arms were: Party per pale; (1) or, three chevronels gules; (2) azur a lion's head erased, lampassé, or the tongue supporting a ring of the same.

The estate of Lanclos was actually situated in the commune of Virey-sur-Bar (Aube).

possessed, therefore, all the qualities which the great nobles of the time required of the members of their suites, and he was clever enough to captivate the Duc d'Elboeuf, a prince of the house of Lorraine, who took him into his service.

From this time Henri de Lanclos was secure from what he used to call his "dunghill," that is to say, from his dubious acquaintances and surreptitious mendicity. When he became a courtier he affected to despise music, but it was only a pretence. He suffered acutely, in fact, at not being able to play his beloved lute. One day he had gone to Vienne, in the Dauphiny, to stay at the house of a certain old man called Gaultier, who was a wonderful musician, and had been one of his companions in distress. After they had greeted each other, he said:

"I suppose you never play the lute nowadays? Personally, I consider it degrading and have given it up."

"Nothing on earth would make me play," said the other with equal contempt.

The two men went for a walk after dinner, and on their return Henri was overcome with emotion on seeing several lutes piled up on a table. He asked for an explanation.

"Oh, these are the children's," said Gaultier. "They play with them. They are in a pitiful

state; I assure you there isn't a whole string among them."

Lanclos, without a word, snatched up one of the instruments, tuned it, quivering with excitement the while, and unable to resist the force that was driving him.

"Ha!" he cried. "Isn't this a wonderful saraband?"

He began to play, while Gaultier, equally forgetful of his previous disdain, clasped another lute in his arms, exclaiming: "What do you think of this one?"

The world ceased to exist for them. They played on deliriously until complete exhaustion obliged them to halt thirty-six hours later. They had forgotten to eat or drink.

Lanclos often felt the need of such orgies of sound and melody. They provided a relief for feelings which could find no outlet in the life he was then leading in the house of the Duc d'Elboeuf. Reading also helped to hold him back from the debauchery to which he seems to have been naturally inclined.

In either 1615 or 1616, when he was twenty-four years of age, he married Marie-Barbe de La Marche.

By this marriage he became connected with the family of d'Abra de Raconis—a step towards

elevation and power.[1] The couple were not at all suited to each other. Marie-Barbe was extremely pious, and longed to lead him, submissive, repentant, and forswearing his licentiousness, into the paths of virtue. So opinionated was she that they soon drifted insensibly into a state of antagonism. From time to time, however, a sudden peace would fall, and they would enjoy a precarious friendliness and ephemeral happiness. In 1617 and 1619 two children were born to them, Charles and Léonor. Distinguished godparents held them at the baptismal font, and they succeeded for a time in distracting their mother from her religious exercises and procuring for their father some measure of liberty. Probably he abused this liberty, because shortly afterwards he left the household of the Duc d'Elboeuf for that of Timoléon d'Epinay, Maréchal de Saint-Luc, who took him into his service as equerry and in addition appointed him lieutenant, and afterwards captain, of a company of infantry in the regiment which was under his command.

[1] Marie-Barbe de La Marche was a sister of Madeleine de La Marche, wife of Pierre d'Abra de Raconis, who was a son of Olivier d'Abra de Raconis, seigneur of Havelu, and of Peronne de Félins. His younger brother, Charles-François d'Abra de Raconis, was a favourite of Richelieu, and became Bishop of Lavaur. He became celebrated by his attacks on Jansenism. (See *Bibliothèque nationale, manuscrits, Dossiers bleus, No.* 2 and *Archives nationales,* Y. 213, fo. 368, under the date 20th March, 1668, for further details about the d'Abra de Raconis family.)

Music seems to have had something to do with this appointment. The marshal was a Norman, steeped in the coarse joviality of his province, and fonder of passing his leisure in dissipation than in studying strategy. He played the lute, danced, wrote verses and prose, and loved gaiety. In short, he preferred to live for pleasure rather than for glory. His house in the Place Royale had become transformed into a sort of hostelry where men drank until they rolled under the tables, and women received an ardent and lusty welcome. His officers, moreover, were allowed to make free of this house in which all sorts of debauchery rubbed shoulders with drunkenness. They were for the most part intelligent enough ruffians, who were glad to indulge their taste for revelry while keeping an eye on the way to promotion. There was not a reputable man among them.

Henri de Lanclos was soon at home in this society, and was at pains to ingratiate himself in order to strengthen his position. Knowing that the marshal liked witty impiety, he distinguished himself by his daring conversation. Probably he also cultivated the friendship of Louis d'Epinay, Comte d'Etlan, his patron's eldest son, who was one of the most abandoned of licentious poets in an age which was very fruitful of cynical poetry. Louis later became an abbot. By dint of intrigue

and by forming friendships Henri de Lanclos wormed himself into the confidence of the set of freethinkers who lived in the district of the Marais, and against whose flagrant disbelief the Jesuits and monks continually waged violent war.

Life in the marshal's circle was gradually making him forget his own fireside, when an event occurred which drew him back to the parish of Saint-Jean-en-Grève and the exhortations of his deserted wife. His third child, a daughter, was born in November, 1620. She was destined to hand his name down to posterity embellished with a halo of tenderness and grace. He was at pains to secure for her godparents who could help her to climb the ladder of life. Nicholas de Villotret, King's Counsellor and Extraordinary Treasurer-General for War, and his daughter, Anne de Villotret, assumed that responsibility.[1] They did not know what they were undertaking, and it may be that they regretted their imprudence later; but at that time they thought their god-daughter perfectly charming as she lay smiling among the lace trimmings of her cot. They called her Anne, and hoped that the baby smile would remain throughout her life on her lips —those lips which looked as though they had been modelled by Venus herself.

[1] When Ninon was born the Lanclos family was living in the parish of Saint-Jean-en-Grève. She was baptised on 10th November, 1620, in the church of that parish.

As she grew and became conscious of her own existence, the little girl, by the very charm of her prattling and her gestures, filled with poetry the gloomy house where Madame de Lanclos mouthed her prayers. She began to blossom into loveliness. Her intrinsic charm became so apparent that the name of Anne seemed unsuitable for such a dainty fairy. The diminutives of Annine, Nanie, and Nanine rose irresistibly to people's lips, until at last someone hit upon Ninon, a truly marvellous discovery, combining in its symbolism so much freshness, brightness and youthful simplicity, two musical syllables wherein bells tinkle, wings flutter, doves coo, and the gaiety of love awakens in the Spring. Madame de Lanclos was the only person who disapproved of this pet name for her daughter. She had not much voice in the education of her sons, who were now at school and removed from her tutelage, but she was determined not to delegate to anyone else the task of moulding the mind of her winsome daughter. She longed to endow her with her own taste for piety, and even if she could not succeed in getting her shut up in a convent, she intended at least to send her out into the world equipped with the mind and demeanour of a nun.

Unfortunately for her plan, her husband interposed his will on this point. Monsieur de Lanclos imagined a very different destiny for Ninon. He

recognised the precocity of her intellect and felt that she, like himself, was eager to live and would be greedy for pleasure.

The hostility which had lain dormant between the two broke out again over the head of Ninon. At one moment the child's spirits would be depressed by the homilies of preachers who promised that the reward of present virtue would come in a problematical future. Then she would be found listening wide-eyed to the lessons taught by the philosophers who advised all to take their satisfaction in the present existence. Doubt entered her mind. She went to the confessional with a mocking smile on her lips, and preferred the easy-going abbots who haunted drawing-rooms with minds intent on poetry and women to the fanatical priests who thundered from the pulpit against sin, and turned God's goodness into ferocity. She perceived, moreover, that it was simply obedience to tradition that took the disorderly flock of the faithful to church. On days of penitence Madame de Lanclos used to drag her to the church of the Minims in the Place Royale, and there she would watch the behaviour of the nobles and ladies around her, who were gathered together in the name of religion. The church seemed to her to have been expressly built for the purpose of keeping worldly trysts among its arches and pillars. Here and there were

certainly a few devout worshippers, who appeared overwhelmed by the weight of their remorse, and bowed down by their years of prayers. But these exceptional beings seemed to attract no admiration, and the Minims themselves appeared to dread their approach. The other guests of the Lord plainly showed by their attitude their complete indifference to the mystery that was unfolding before them. They came gorgeously clad, merely to flaunt their opulence, refinement and beauty. Scornful of the indignant protests of Jesuit writers, the women entered the sacred edifice with their faces painted and their bosoms bared, escorted by their trains of admirers. While Mass was being celebrated or the sermon was being preached the air would be filled with their whispered conversations and murmured flirtations. Love-letters and amorous verses were passed surreptitiously from hand to hand, and assignations were made for future meetings. Looks and actions alike were an offence to the Deity, and the church had become an antechamber to the bower.

The example of such depravity helped to turn Ninon, who was naturally sincere and loyal, away from religion. She soon began to think herself tyrannised over by her mother, but, being kind-hearted, she took care not to let her see it. There is no doubt, however, that she preferred Monsieur

de Lanclos' educative methods, and submitted herself obediently to his teaching. To his guidance she owed her social charm and her superior intellectuality. He substituted books of a worldly content for the pious works that Madame de Lanclos extolled above all others, and saw with joy how his daughter's mind became receptive at an early age to new ideas. Thenceforward he gave her masters who would fashion her intellect after his own design. She studied the sciences eagerly, learnt Spanish and Italian, and was soon beginning to reason on abstruse subjects.

Her learning did not detract from her charm, because Monsieur de Lanclos fought as keenly against pedantry as against religion. It seemed to him that both would find a natural and victorious enemy in gallantry, so he endeavoured to develop it in Ninon in the form of an intimate art, the art of charming circumspectly. He taught her to love music before instructing her in its rudiments. He desired that of her own accord she should long to play the lute. After assiduous study Ninon attained that stage of proficiency that permits of interpreting the thought of the composer and adding something of one's own, and ere long she could express the subtleties of feeling and the depths of passion. She used to treat her lute as a living thing, to be moved at will to joy

or sorrow. Sometimes, when she succeeded in overcoming her shyness, she would sing, accompanying herself. Her voice was small, but so sweet and warm that she easily won the applause of her hearers. Her music gave her the habit of dignified attitudes, and dancing, which she studied later, suppled her body and gave grace to her movements. The ladies of the Marais soon found themselves inviting to their houses this young girl who could hold forth on the most serious subjects while she minced behind her fan, and who glided through the movements of a saraband with as much ease as Monsieur de Mollier.

Thus, in spite of his wife's determined efforts to regain her lost authority, Monsieur de Lanclos reached the goal at which he aimed. He knew that Ninon would not now help to swell the ranks of the lean-faced bigots. She was already a girl of exceptional charm, free from stultifying scruples and capable of understanding anything, an eager student of science and an adorer of beauty. He thought her worthy to mate with a prince, but he could not possibly realise that he had made of her an epicurean after his own pattern, one who would be satisfied with her epicureanism, would never reject it, and would prefer the delights of independence to those of marriage.

Grave preoccupations were distracting him from

his parental duties, and it seemed to him that the time had come to put into her hands the books from which he had derived his own principles of morality and his maxims of education. Among these books was the *Essays* of Montaigne. Ninon was still too young to understand fully their depth and subtlety, but later she read them with delight. Her father recommended them to her as a breviary in which the wisdom and the frailty of human beings are examined in turn. He advised her to read them daily in order to strengthen her love of truth, and that she might learn therein the need for tolerance.

CHAPTER II

IN common with many other freethinkers of the Marais, Henri de Lanclos did not feel himself obliged to practise the conjugal virtues, nor did his wife attempt to render them attractive to him. From time to time he followed his patron to the wars, and at other times took up his "winter quarters" in the Hôtel de Saint-Luc. His duties as an educator and his military functions left him some leisure, and this he gave up to dissipation. In the bourgeois households which he used to visit in company with other officers there were many complacent ladies who were willing to be amiable to a soldier.

Chroniclers have preserved no record for us of his amatory conquests. It is known, however, that from 1610 onwards he had watched two little girls growing up in the home of his friends, Nicolas de Gouges and Marie Briant, his wife. Marie and Lucrèce, aged ten years and eight years respectively, were charming and lively little girls of whom he was very fond. He used to play with them like a gay and nimble elder brother, and his marriage did not interrupt his visits to them. The girls grew

into young ladies, and Marie married the Sieur de La Clémentière. Lucrèce, on the other hand, looked forward to marriage with mixed feelings. Unfortunately she had fallen in love with Henri de Lanclos. He was nine years older than she, unhappily married, and so estranged from his wife that he seemed to be free from all ties. He had had many love affairs, and probably he allowed his affection for Lucrèce to grow without realising into what danger it would lead them.

Somewhere about the year 1626, Jean de Riberolles, a lawyer from Périgord who was also in Parliament, and was secretary to Henri, Comte de Bourdeille, governor of Périgord, was introduced to the family of Nicolas de Gouges. They lived in the Rue du Battoir, in the parish of Saint-André des Arts. Long before, de Riberolles had met and wooed Lucrèce when, at the age of fourteen years, she had accompanied Madame de Beaurégard on a trip to her estates at Dordogne. He succumbed to her charms again, and asked for her hand in marriage. For a girl of her class this scrivener, who was attached to the household of a great noble and was on terms of friendship with many powerful people, was a good match, and his proposals were accepted. The contract was signed on 4th January, 1627, before the notaries Jacques Bélin and François Capitan and a large company of friends, and the

marriage took place shortly afterwards. Henri de Lanclos felt hurt at the marriage, although he could not deny that it was natural for a woman of twenty-five years of age to wish to assure her future, and he had nothing to offer her but a clandestine affection which might flicker out at any time. He may not even have told her what pleasure he found in her company. At any rate he broke off all relations with Nicolas de Gouges and avoided the Périgordian circles where the de Riberolles were likely to be met.

Some months passed and Lucrèce was finding little happiness in her life with her husband. He turned out to be bad-tempered, stingy, unscrupulous and even brutal at times. Far from satisfying her appetite for love he expected her to use her beauty for the furtherance of his schemes. Unconsciously the young wife began to hate her husband and to remember the kind friend of her infancy and girlhood, who, for some reason she was far from suspecting, no longer came to visit her.

The desire to see him again made her cunning. She encouraged her husband to talk of the truant in such a way that she communicated to him her own desire that he should visit them in their home. De Riberolles had met Lanclos at the house in the Rue du Battoir, and had found him a model of discretion. He went several times in person to ask him to resume an intimacy which had been interrupted

for no apparent reason, and, to Lucrèce's joy, Lanclos understood that he had not been forgotten and that the bride was not very happy. He continued, nevertheless, to make his visits few and far between.

In 1628 Jean de Riberolles, who had had a long respite from his secretarial duties, decided to return to Monsieur de Bourdeille, his patron in Périgord. He told his wife that it was useless to take her with him; she would hamper his movements both in the dull town of Périgueux, where he was to spend the winter, and in the castles of Brantôme and Bourdeille in the summer. He would prefer her to remain in Paris with her sister, Marie de Gouges, who had recently married Simon Le Tellier as her second husband. Simon Le Tellier, Sieur du Pavillon, was an officer in the King's Scottish Bodyguard.

Lucrèce pretended to be greatly upset at his decision in order the better to disguise her real satisfaction. De Riberolles installed her in her brother-in-law's house in the Rue Saint-Anastase and departed quite reassured. One year of marriage had sufficed to teach the young wife the joys of freedom. She regained her bright looks, and determined that her holiday from matrimony should be devoted to pleasure.

No one could think it improper of Henri de

Lanclos to visit Simon Le Tellier, who was a brother officer, and whose wife, moreover, he had known from her infancy. Lucrèce was overjoyed, and soon captured his affection, which had waned, although it had not died altogether, and now became all the stronger for having been suppressed. She determined to turn affection into passion, and Lanclos entered eagerly into this game of gallantry. As the weeks rolled by he found himself enjoying more and more the provocative talk and actions of the sly minx, until he could no longer put her out of his thoughts. He had, indeed, fallen in love. His love for her, and the less ardent affection with which he surrounded his daughter, seem to have been the dominating factors in his life.

Simon Le Tellier and his wife probably perceived what was going on, but if so they shut their eyes and raised no obstacles to the affair. They were neither of them affected with over-much delicacy, and had scant sympathy for the provincial lawyer husband.

Lucrèce enjoyed complete freedom in her brother-in-law's house, and one day when confined to bed by an illness she took it into her head to receive Lanclos in her bedroom. Endearments then gave place to caresses. Just then Marie de Gouges was seized with a long and serious illness, and Simon, hovering anxiously over his wife, took

little notice of his sister-in-law. Thus Henri and Lucrèce, freed from all control, became lovers. They respected less and less the roof that gave them shelter, feeling certain that their doings would attract no attention in that quarter of the Marais, where so many gallants paraded their love affairs. Every hour that Lanclos did not spend at the Hôtel de Saint-Luc, or with his daughter in the parish of Saint-Jean-en-Grève, he passed in the Rue Saint-Anastase, committing all sorts of follies. The street was narrow and short and just off the Place Royale. Its inhabitants were shopkeepers and the like, and there were few passers-by. The handsome officer's attentions were noticed, however, and it became necessary to take precautions if trouble were to be avoided.

When the fine weather came people of all sorts used to gather on the doorsteps, gossiping and taking the air. They would see Henri de Lanclos leaving the house, the doors of which were ostentatiously closed and bolted behind him. When, however, night had fallen and the neighbours were all asleep, he would steal back, all the more eager for his walk, and the gates would open mysteriously at his approach. In order to avoid the metallic clang of his spurs he would take off his boots and glide like a shadow into the house.

Later the lovers took a servant girl, Françoise

du Charme, wife of Charles de La Croix, a footman in the employ of Claude de Lorraine, Duc de Chevreuse, into their confidence. She was devoted to them, and with her aid they felt secure, but they were surprised, nevertheless, from time to time. Once some ladies came to visit Lucrèce and she had to hide her lover hastily. He took refuge under the stairs, and waited with what patience he could muster until the intruders took their departure.

It is doubtful whether Françoise de Charme was really faithful to them, and whether she too did not suffer from undue curiosity and a prurient tongue. Who but she could have made known certain intimate details which became public property? However that may be, Henri and Lucrèce trusted her implicitly. One day, deciding that it was too troublesome to hold their meetings in Le Tellier's house, they borrowed the servant's lodgings, which were situated a few doors away in the same street. The house was poor and meanly furnished, so Lucrèce had a comfortable bed brought in, and rewarded Françoise for her hospitality by undertaking to pay the rent.

This was a most imprudent move. Every eye in the street was on their comings and goings, and, whereas it had been possible before to pretend that friendship alone existed between the two, no one could believe it any longer. Lucrèce was ruined

in the eyes of her shopkeeper neighbours, a fact that did not trouble her much while she was able to enjoy the company of her lover.

Her principal dread was not of the people round about, but of her duped husband away in rocky and forest-clad Périgord. De Riberolles may have had his wife surrounded by spies, or he may have entrusted the task of keeping a furtive eye upon her to some of his friends; but through some such agency he had learnt of his betrayal. Probably he thought that the damage was not irreparable, and he also realised that he had laid himself open to the charge of indifference by failing to support his wife during his absence. At any rate, he did not think it advisable to make a scandal, and remained quietly where he was, biding his time and contenting himself with writing to her horrible letters and satires teeming with suspicion and malice.

Lucrèce forgot the bitterness of these outrageous letters in the arms of her lover. They had become more audacious now, and never left each other, but lived openly together like two happily-married folk. At Le Tellier's house, where Marie was now restored to health and had resumed her ordinary occupations, there were often jolly parties with the united family and the friend adopted as one of themselves. On these occasions they forgot to drink the health of the absent lawyer.

This life, pleasant though it was, could not be expected to go on for ever, and after two years and three months of exile Jean de Riberolles returned to Paris in the spring of the year 1630. He came to his brother-in-law's house, where he met his wife. After greeting her he begged her pardon for the meagre support he had given her during his absence and for the wicked letters he had written to her. He was a peaceful quill-driver, and had no intention of provoking Lanclos, the swordsman, who would quickly have despatched him out of the world. So he bottled up his ill-feeling and plotted. When he resumed his domestic life he pretended to be a complacent husband, but he deprived Lucrèce of all protection by removing her from the Le Telliers' house. When he had her at his mercy he told her that he had returned from Périgord as poor as Job, having had none of his salary paid him. He took her silver and raised money on it. Next he schemed to get his unfaithful wife's dowry into his own pocket, but she firmly refused to be plundered, and appealed to her wedding contract, which gave her separate possession of her own estate.

De Riberolles did not insist, but he pondered the situation. He decided that since she had made a fool of him he might as well profit by the fact. He hinted to her that his master, Monsieur de

Bourdeille, thought her charming, and felt very well disposed towards her, and that if she would accompany him on his next journey into Périgord the count would give her anything she asked as the price of her favour, and would, moreover, pay him the six thousand crowns he owed him for his six years' service.

Lucrèce was not in the least interested. She was not a loose woman, and had given herself to Lanclos only because she loved him. She had no intention of falling in with her husband's shameful schemes. She rose up in arms indignantly against his proposals, and he let the storm subside while he awaited a better opportunity. He aimed at breaking down her resolution gradually, and continued asking her to commit dishonourable actions for his benefit. He did not notice that her hatred of him grew with each successive day. Five or six times he brought to the house one of his fellow. counsellors, from whom he expected much help. He told Lucrèce what a powerful man this was, and how he would rise to fill great positions, and would be able to give him work, and added that he hoped very much that she would not be indifferent to the great man's attentions.

Lucrèce absolutely refused to listen to him; and at last de Riberolles, determined to gain his end, himself brought the counsellor into her bedroom.

Terror-stricken, she rushed to the stables for refuge. Her husband followed her there, threw himself on his knees before her and offered to allow her to follow her inclinations if she would only return to the room. She resisted still, and he dragged her thither by force; but neither violence nor entreaties could alter her determination to remain faithful to Lanclos.

The counsellor went away abashed, and de Riberolles made a great disturbance, which lasted all night. He caught his wife by the throat and looked for his sword, which, luckily, he could not find. From that time onwards his frenzy never abated, but he concealed his evil intentions. He was now so unbalanced that it became dangerous for his wife to remain with him. He threatened her continually, attempted to strangle her several times, and kept her in continual fear of her life. Lucrèce had deemed it advisable to get rid of the servant Françoise du Charme, and had replaced her by another girl, who was sorry for her plight and helped to protect her.

She tried to calm the madman, and obtained from him a promise that he would go and confess to the Minims at the Place Royale. She hoped that he would return transformed, but he did not. Then she informed him that she was going to place herself in the protection of her relations. She retired, as

a matter of fact, to the lodging of a Madame Marchand, who lived in the same house as the Le Telliers. There she called together her mother, her brother-in-law and her friends, including Marguerite de Lessan, widow of Antoine de la Salle. They reviewed the situation together, with the result that a complaint about her husband's violence was lodged before the Justice of Peace at the Châtelet, and a suit for separation was begun before the civil authorities.

In the meantime Henri de Lanclos had not abandoned her. He had kept his eye on the unhappy household, ready to intervene at the first call for help, and he hastened to his mistress as soon as he heard of her flight. The Le Telliers befriended them, and they resumed their relations, meeting in Madame Marchand's room, or at the house of Françoise du Charme, who was still their friend. For fear of being surprised, however, Lanclos kept a candle lighted at night and his loaded pistol ready to his hand. They need not have feared a surprise attack, as it turned out, because de Riberolles had no intention of avenging his honour by means of weapons, and contented himself with keeping his wife on tenterhooks. He used frequently to send his lackey to fetch her at times when he was sure she was with Lanclos. At first she would not give him the satisfaction of knowing that she had

left her shelter, and one morning when she was sleeping at Françoise de Charme's house the Le Telliers' servant came to warn her that the lawyer's messenger was asking for her. She jumped out of bed hastily, threw a fur wrap around herself, and returned barefooted to her brother-in-law's house. Thus the lackey could bear witness that she was living chastely in the bosom of her family. Later she became more careless, and would answer from behind closed bed-curtains that she was suffering from colic and needed rest, and would come later to answer her husband's bidding. Sometimes, in obedience to the law, she went to pay him a hasty visit, extracted a few *pistoles* from him with difficulty, and came away, advising him to "have a good time and drink to her health."

Lucrèce's new servant had been instructed what to do if de Riberolles ever arrived unexpectedly when Lanclos was there. She was to pretend to be asleep in order to give the lover a chance to escape from the husband; but the husband took good care never to show himself in person. Lanclos had sent him word through a trusty friend that if he continued to make himself a nuisance to his wife he would be obliged to stab him. The threat produced the desired effect, and the lovers, reassured, audaciously went, about this

time, for a week's country holiday at Saint-Maur, driving thither in Madame de Lessan's carriage.

Lanclos was anxious, however, to find better protection for Lucrèce, and she was willing to take his advice. He interested Rénée d'Epinay, Marquise de Beuvron, daughter of the Maréchal de Saint-Luc, in her cause. She was a loose-living, good-tempered woman, who had long been a favourite butt of the scurrilous song-mongers, but any unhappy love affair was sure of her sympathy. She offered a home in her house to Lucrèce, who for two months enjoyed complete rest from persecution. Probably de Riberolles objected to this too efficient protection, and Lucrèce was obliged to leave the Hôtel de Beuvron. She went, again through Lanclos's agency, to the Hôtel de Créquy, where the Maréchal and his two daughters, Madame de Canaples and Madame de Rosny, received her sympathetically. Jean de Riberolles had become a moralist, and was indignant at seeing vice thus not only condoned, but aided and abetted. His fury increased, and one day when he met Lucrèce in the Place Royale with Monsieur Duver, who had been her friend from childhood, he called her vile names, and shouting "I will kill you," tried to attack her with his sword. Several men who were passing by had to intervene. His hatred had blinded him. He still had no intention of

provoking a quarrel with Lanclos, but he thought that the time had come to take judicial measures, so he brought a charge of adultery against Lucrèce and her lover. He had collected together all the stories that were going round the quarter, and had even got some details out of her servant, Françoise du Charme. Scandal and ridicule mattered nothing to him now. He craved revenge and was determined to have it at any price.

The trial began before the Provost of Paris at the beginning of 1631. For Lucrèce and Henri it was no longer a question of playing the entertaining rôle of lovers after the fashion of Italian comedy; they had to defend themselves against a cunning foe well versed in all the intricacies of legal procedure. For a whole year the parties wrangled before the justices at the Châtelet, mutually accusing each other. Evidence poured in and accumulated, and the trial gradually fell into a state of stagnation.

De Riberolles, in order to give it a new lease of life, appealed to be called before the bar of the *Parlement criminel.* He won his appeal, and Counsellor Samuel de La Nauve was appointed to conduct the examinations. Lanclos and his mistress had to attend and reply to all sorts of odious questions. Their adversary's case was supported by remarkably clear and circumstantial evidence, and, as a betrayed husband, he made his plea in terms calculated to

wring tears from a stone. He introduced the Le Telliers, Françoise du Charme and Madame de Lessan into the case as accomplices.

Unfortunately for him, however, he had to do with intelligent and alert people. Lanclos and Lucrèce denied the acts with which they were charged, and the others asserted that they had seen nothing but honourable kindness and courtesy in the relations of the two supposedly guilty ones. They hinted that the whole case of the plaintiff was a mass of faked evidence and falsehoods, and each one in turn called his morality into question.

De Riberolles did not care. He continued to hurl the basest calumnies at them like a madman. Each day he produced fresh witnesses, including all sorts of riff-raff who were doubtless well paid to support his assertions.

Henri de Lanclos bore these ceaseless denunciations with more and more impatience. This endless coming and going from one court to another was poisoning his whole life, but he would not give in. After two years of litigation he was still standing unfalteringly by the side of his mistress.

He began to perceive that the affair might soon become even more dangerous, and probably he had received a warning that a plot was being hatched against him. The Périgordians in Paris all sided with de Riberolles. They included many

fearless and insolent bullies, titled adventurers who lived by their wits, and were on friendly terms with many powerful people. One of them, Louis de Chabans, wielded a great deal of power. There is no truth in the assertion that he had risen from humble origins, and had long ago in his youth supported himself by playing the lute or violin. In appearance he was insignificant-looking, with angular features, protruding eyes, a hooked nose, thick lips overhung with heavy moustaches, a receding chin and bushy hair. His character was as unattractive as his appearance. He was said to have served his apprenticeship in the army in the days of Henri IV, and later he wrote on military subjects with much success. He then showed himself equally competent to deal with finance, and the king was indebted to him for discovering a means of preventing the scourge of duelling. Malherbe had honoured him by writing a sonnet about his *Recueil de vers lugubres et spirituels*. Disdaining all commerce with lesser mortals he dedicated his writings to the king, the queens, and the people of France. Several princes and marshals, including Condé, Montmorency and Schomberg, had ended by taking him seriously. Bassompière alone had no use for him.

By dint of intrigue he had obtained for himself the appointments of Gentleman-in-Waiting in

Ordinary, Marshal of the King's Camps and Armies, Counsellor of State, Governor of Saint-Foy, and General of the Artillery of the Venetian Republic. He was, therefore, a very powerful enemy for Henri de Lanclos, if he took it upon himself to speak to the judges in favour of de Riberolles. He does not, however, seem to have thought of intervening thus on behalf of his countryman, but he procured for him false witnesses, and (being a believer in quick measures), several bullies capable of killing his enemy.

There is no doubt that de Riberolles, with the aid of Chabans, was planning to procure his vengeance by murder. A certain Baptiste de Bondonnière, a man of very bad reputation, was chosen to get rid of Lanclos. This man had had charge of Madame de Chabans' affairs, but had robbed her. De Riberolles procured his release from prison, and was reserving him for some well premeditated purpose. They planned an ambush, and as Lanclos was coming home from the Hôtel de Saint-Luc one evening through the streets of the Marais he perceived Bondonnière lying in wait for him before the Hôtel de Vitry, not far from the convent of the Minims in the Place Royale. Behind him, in a threatening group, stood de Riberolles, his two brothers, Nicolas and Germain, and an unknown man in grey who held a

naked sword. As soon as they saw Lanclos they cried: "There he is!"

Luckily Lanclos was on his guard and was well armed. He was, moreover, of a naturally fearless nature, and advanced towards them scoffingly, while they, afraid of being seen, retired, hurling abuse at him. Next day Lanclos, who was accompanied by two friends, had an opportunity of trouncing Bondonnière, whom he met by chance, but scorned to touch the coward.

From this moment he realised, however, that he would have to defend himself with greater energy, and that it might even be advisable to suppress the hired witnesses by terrorisation. Louis Turgis, a miller, had given damning evidence against him before the judges, and Lanclos followed him into his shop and beat him. Claude Musnier, another perjurer, he beat upon the skull with the flat of his sword. One day when he was out riding with his lackey, Leglison, he passed, in the Rue de la Monnaie, Madame Anne Maugin, a venomous creature who had made dreadful accusations against him. He alighted, kicked, slapped and struck her with his cane, saying that he would kill her if she bore false witness against him. She bolted, screaming for help, into the house of Marin Gobart, a locksmith. Lanclos followed, picked her up and carried her to the Cour de la Monnaie, where he promised to

ill-treat her no further, provided she held her tongue in future and gave him the addresses of other witnesses who had been too garrulous. When she refused, he kept her until evening, took her round several houses and tried to draw from her a public avowal that she had lied before the judge. A few days later he abducted her from her house, beat her again, and forced her to decamp from the neighbourhood.

These acts of violence, as a matter of fact, did him no good. Anne Maugin was roused to fury and lodged a complaint against him before Charles Le Moyne, magistrate of For l'Evèque. A surgeon was called, who enumerated the scratches upon her hands and nose, and the magistrate ordered the assailant to be locked up forthwith. When he was examined, he replied that he knew Anne Maugin to be a loose woman, and accused her of being de Riberolles' mistress, and of having given birth to a child "in the hospital of this town," of which de Riberolles was the father. He denied having beaten her, but he was nevertheless kept in prison.

Lanclos's policy of violence did, however, hinder de Riberolles' case before the *Parlement criminel.* Perhaps he feared that his enemy was going to escape him after all; at any rate, he urged that the case should be pressed on. Lanclos on his side fretted at his immobility. He loaded the

magistrate with requests to hurry on the examinations and set him free, urging that to have beaten a woman was not a major crime. Monsieur Le Moyne agreed, and, after cautioning him, signed the order for his release.

Lanclos recovered his liberty about November 2nd, 1632, to the great indignation of de Riberolles. It is not known for certain how he spent his time between then and December 26th of the same year. Louis de Chabans, always de Riberolles' abettor, may, during this period, have done something to incur Lanclos's active hatred, and, in fact, the drama that suddenly followed supports the supposition. He found himself faced with a new antagonist, and his fury broke bounds. De Riberolles and the others who had attempted to disturb his peace after all meant but little to him. Armed with a sword, he searched that quarter of the Marais where Chabans was often to be seen. Not finding him there, he laid in wait for him in the Rue Saint-Gilles, behind the convent of the Minims, in the Place Royale, opposite the Hôtel de Venise, where the ambassador of the republic lived. He knew that some day or other Chabans, who was General of the Venetian Artillery, was sure to come there to receive instructions from the Doge.

Sure enough on December 26th Chabans' carriage drew up before the gate of the house. Lanclos let

him go about his business. He himself advanced with an indifferent air and managed to slip unnoticed behind the vehicle. There he waited.

Soon Chabans came out and Lanclos drew his sword. It is not known whether Chabans saw him and tried to defend himself, or whether he tried to seek refuge in his carriage, but as he reached the step of the carriage Lanclos sprang upon him furiously and ran him through twice. That was enough for the Grand Master of Artillery. He fell bleeding to the ground.

Lanclos, having satisfied his hatred, fled, and no one thought of stopping him. If he had been the victor in an honourable combat he would have been sure of loyal friends to provide money and refuges from avenging justices, but he does not seem to have reckoned on anyone else's help, and had embarked on his dark deed with his plans for his safety already made. By the time Madame de Chabans besought the king to avenge the death of her husband, and Louis XIII. ordered a search to be made for him, he had crossed the frontier, and no trace of him was afterwards found.[1]

[1] In a letter from Claude de Chaulne to the Comte de Tournon is the following couplet:—

"Quand l'Enclos et Monsieur de Faure paasseront pour des buveurs d'eau . . ."

If this refers to Henri de Lanclos, he may have been residing about the middle of the XVII. century either at Grenoble, where Claude de Chaulne held an office under the Crown, or at Saumur, from which place the letter was addressed.

On July 23rd, 1633, the *Parlement criminel*, at de Riberolles' request, issued an order for his arrest in the words "that the aforesaid de Gouges and Lanclos shall be taken bodily and led prisoners to the Conciergerie of the Palais if they are taken; their goods seized and sequestered until these orders are obeyed."

The lover had sacrificed his life's peace to his love, but the husband continued meanly to pursue his vengeance, even although he can have got little satisfaction by so doing.

CHAPTER III

THUS does passion play havoc with the minds of men, making them lose their philosophical serenity. Henri de Lanclos had disobeyed the teachings of his masters and could no longer call himself a follower of Pyrrhon and Epicurus. He left behind him two ruined homes where he was remembered with bitterness. Madame de Chabans' sorrow was, if anything, less than that felt by Madame de Lanclos and her children, since, in their case, shame was added to the loss of a father who was still beloved in spite of everything. Ninon, in particular, was overwhelmed with grief. She had lost at the same time her father and her best and most stimulating friend; one whose presence, at the critical age when childhood is merging into girlhood, was vitally necessary to her. The family passed their days in mourning and solitude. Madame de Lanclos saw in her husband's self-inposed exile a judgment of heaven. He had always lived such a dissolute life that she felt sure he would inevitably receive his deserts here below; but she still hoped to regain her lost influence over her daughter, whose soul had been infected by

her father's pernicious teachings. She would save her at least from the tortures of everlasting damnation. But, alas! her solicitude came too late, and the evil had taken deeper root than she imagined. When Lanclos fled to foreign lands he left behind him a personality fashioned to his own pattern. Ninon was not able to emancipate herself at once. She was still too young to resist her mother's wishes and she resumed her church-going, much to everyone's satisfaction. What they did not know was that she was in the habit of slipping a romance among the sacred books she carried, and while people thought her intent upon the offices for the day, she was in reality engrossed in stories in which the pleasures of the flesh were enticingly set forth. Ninon was, in fact, entering upon that phase of curiosity common to adolescent girls; and, moreover, she seemed to be passing through it without a trace of nervousness and with a desire simply to gain enlightenment rather than to experiment. She was soon conversant with love in its many forms, or at least in the forms depicted by the authors of the day. She made her discoveries in the works of Rabelais, Béroalde de Verville, Sorel and Marguerite de Navarre, who revealed passion in its crude and brutal aspects; and again in more sentimental and allegorical guise in the writings of Sainte-Suzanne, Audiguier, D'Urfé

and Gomberville. Browsing amongst them all, she managed to gain some idea of what the reality would be.

In the meantime Madame de Lanclos thought that the sly minx was absorbed in religious exercises and rejoiced to see her so attentive and lost in pious meditation. Grace had surely penetrated at last into the refractory soul of her daughter, and she had visions of her becoming a nun.

Somewhat to her surprise, however, Ninon still showed herself intractable on certain points. She scoffed at sermons on the vanity of luxury and refused absolutely to uglify her person. On the contrary, she bedecked herself as coquettishly as ever. Gay laces and ribbons embellished her badly-made bodice, which, in spite of the shoddiness of its material, was artfully arranged to reveal the elegance of her form. No amount of argument could make her swathe her throat. She knew that her bosom was firm and well-moulded and, like any woman of the world, she would display her charms boldly. Ninon's obstinate refusal to attire herself in seemly fashion worried Madame de Lanclos a good deal, and so did the persistence with which she clung to her music and other amusements. She would give up none of her recreations and especially not dancing, although the priests abhorred it as a most poisonous form of sin.

The poor woman did not remain long in her delusion. Ninon wanted to oblige her, but soon became bored with living in an odour of sanctity. The perpetual aroma of incense sickened her, and she began to long for independence.

One day she was assisting at the recital of the Passion. In pathetic tones the priests were telling the story of the Cross, while all around were emotional women, their eyes streaming tears. A profound hush fell on the assembly while all communed with their inmost souls. Suddenly the silence was broken by Ninon's clear young voice saying, "What do they want to cry for? *Qu'importa que muero se ressuscitan?*" The words were from a Spanish song in praise of a lady's beautiful eyes. The refrain was going the rounds of the drawing-rooms and young sparks delighted in whispering it into the ears of the hard-hearted fair ones who were leading them into temptation. Anywhere else her hearers would most likely have been amused, but uttered in that sacred spot the words were considered blasphemous. Everyone prepared to fall upon the impious one and rend her, but when they saw Ninon sitting there, blushing and so pretty, they passed off as childish thoughtlessness what may have been, nevertheless, premeditated, and contented themselves with reprimanding her for irreverence.

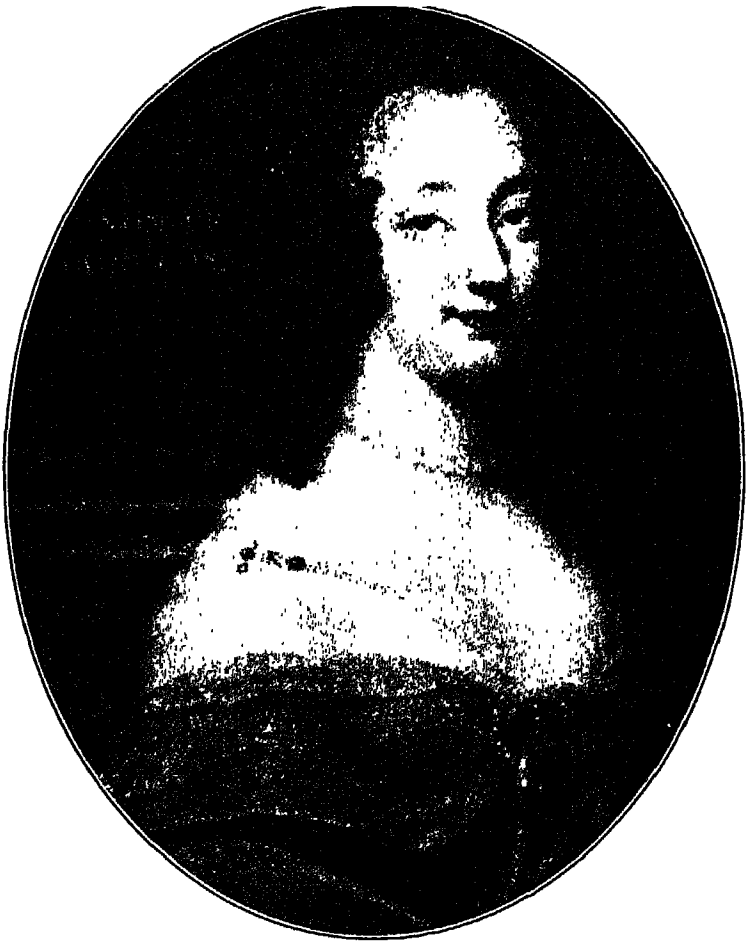
Madame de Lanclos made Ninon seek forgiveness at the confessional and charged the Jesuit, who was warned of her approach, to give her a good scolding. This scolding, however, did not have the desired effect. Ninon showed signs of impatience under the maternal wrath and Jesuitical condemnation. Her desire for independence was slowly reaching the stage of open rebellion.

At this point it would be as well to trace the evolution of Ninon's character and see what influences led her to the ultimate discarding of all religious belief; but unfortunately the whole matter is buried in obscurity, and she left no intimate journal of any sort. There was, to be sure, a sharp conflict between Ninon and Madame de Lanclos. The latter was determined to solve the problem of her daughter's future by marriage or the convent; but Ninon, who was more perspicacious, knew that her place in society was an ambiguous one.

If she had had a large dowry she might have expected to be wooed in spite of the scandal about her father. In the times in which she lived money mated with money more often than love with love, and she had already seen many proofs of this; but she had no dowry. If any suitor did come forward he must have received scant encouragement from her, but there is no proof that she was sought in marriage by anyone.

She was not the sort of girl, however, to allow her charms to be wasted. A glance at her mirror gave her the pleasant assurance that she was beautiful. Her eighteenth-century biographers have a story that about this time a sorcerer called Noctambule came to see her and offered her the choice of three gifts—power, wealth or eternal beauty—and that she chose eternal beauty. That is simply a pleasant fiction to explain how she kept her comely face and lissom figure until the end of her days. The legend sprang from the mind of a certain abbot whose imagination was easily stimulated by wine.

If Ninon had been certain of possessing eternal beauty she would not have been in such a hurry to attract the homage of men; but as it was she welcomed them from whatever quarter they came. It may be thought that her object was to enrich herself through them, but that was not the case. All witnesses agree as to her complete disinterestedness. The fact was that she did not really know whither she was going. This was a new aspect of life in which she lacked experience. Philosophy had warned her against the fallibility of human judgment in general, but she had not been put on her guard against her own feelings. She was full of a vague restlessness which she did not know how to calm, and philosophy and coquetry, woman's



Museum of Versailles From an anonymous painting

Ninon

chief safeguards, both failed her. She was perpetually surrounded by young bloods who enveloped her in an atmosphere of murmured love-making, and she found herself helpless, bewildered, and finally fascinated. What she needed was a guide who could point out the perils of the situation and defend her against herself. Madame de Lanclos was of no use to her. She looked upon the youths who crowded to her house as prospective husbands, and complacently left them at liberty to covet and cajole. They had, however, no serious intentions. Amongst these young coxcombs was Charles-Claude de Beaumont, Vicomte de Chaumusy and Sieur de St. Etienne. Because he was more attractive than the others and pressed his suit with greater ardour and skill, he succeeded in convincing Ninon that never was there love like his, nor greater devotion to her happiness. She had no way of recognising his duplicity nor of knowing how worthless he was as a man, and there was no one to enlighten her. If Madame de Lanclos had had any foresight she would have hastened to drive off this impudent puppy, who was known as a hanger-on of the band of drunkards, atheists and gamesters who haunted the *Pomme de Pin* and the gaming houses of the Place Royale. But she, undiscerning woman, trusted him implicitly and encouraged the budding affair. She admired his vigour and raciness, and

it seems never to have occurred to her that he wanted his pleasures for nothing and free from responsibility. Later on he played a disgraceful part as the Prince de Condé's well-paid accomplice in the kidnapping of Mademoiselle de Sallenove, and it became apparent that he was brave neither in love nor in war. He ignored challenges and evidently cared for nothing but money. This wastrel determined to win Ninon's maiden heart, and thus triumph over his many rivals. To do so he had to use great diplomacy, for the young girl did not surrender without a struggle. Whatever promises she asked he gave with alacrity, and he vowed passionate vows. Ninon was probably not in love with him, but allowed herself to be carried away by her ardent nature. She did not realise the irreparability of her action, and was sure, moreover, that their voluntary union would immediately receive the Church's sanction. Saint-Etienne vehemently protested his sincerity. At length she threw her last scruples overboard and made the sacrifice. It is not known how they managed to evade the vigilance of Madame de Lanclos. Ninon was not very closely guarded, and lovers find means of circumventing many obstacles when it is a question of enjoying each other's company.

The union once accomplished did not last long.

Ninon was bitterly disillusioned almost at once, and perceived that she had sacrificed her virtue to a man who was quite unworthy of the gift. He threw off his garb of courtesy and appeared in his true colours as a treacherous libertine. She fled from him with horror, but allowed herself to entertain no vain regrets. It was part of her creed as an epicurean to accept calmly the aftermath of an accomplished fact, however disagreeable. The disgust with which this first lover inspired her did not, therefore, turn her away from love, which she now knew from experience as well as hearsay. Tallemant asserts that Saint-Etienne inadvertently made Ninon pregnant, but there is no proof of this assertion, and he himself acknowledges that its truth is doubtful.

Saddened by this first love affair, she had an interlude of meditative tranquillity, a respite that was quite natural, but Chavagnac, a writer of memoirs, will have none of it; he asserts that Cardinal de Richelieu, tired of Marion de Lorme, came forward at this moment and offered Ninon fifty thousand crowns in exchange for her favours The sum appears excessive, but in any case these memoirs are apocryphal. Segrais is usually more trustworthy, and he relates that there is a story that the prelate wrote love-letters to Ninon which she answered. Other writers have interpreted this

story carelessly, and even accuse Saint-Etienne of having had a hand in the affair; but they should not be taken seriously.

Even after her affair with Saint-Etienne, Ninon could not be considered a prostitute. Her fall, in spite of Saint-Etienne's babbling, was not of such importance that the Cardinal was likely to have been told of it, and his Eminence's attention was, moreover, occupied with other haughtier and more beautiful women. He had, moreover, no motive in seeking favours which were not for sale and which only became famous many years after his death. So Cardinal de Richelieu may be definitely ruled out of the very long list of lovers who followed in the wake of Ninon's petticoats. The poor child would have been greatly alarmed at attracting the attention of his covetous pomposity, and she would certainly have refused him with scorn, because all her life she detested beards. She hated to feel them brushing her delicate skin, and even in her maturity she preferred smooth-faced cherubs, in whose company she had the illusion of renewing her own youth.

During this time, when her misinformed biographers honoured her with an alliance that she would have hated to see attributed to her, Ninon was enduring the reproaches of Madame de Lanclos. How the old lady came to hear of Saint-

Etienne's misconduct is not known, but probably there were many malicious people ready to enlighten her. She began to surround Ninon with careful surveillance, but she was already stricken with a serious illness and could not follow her young daughter in all her comings and goings, nor could she prevent young blades from storming her house, whispering in corners and snatching furtive kisses. As for Ninon, after her first lapse from virtue, she was finding it increasingly difficult to repress her desires, and she had deliberately made up her mind not to marry. She had been taught by contemporary writers to detest the state of marriage because it stifled independence and forbade indulgence in pleasure.

From amongst a swarm of aspirants she singled out Henri de Lancy, Chevalier de Raré, an absurd choice due to her inexperience. He was the son of Nicolas de Lancy, Baron de Raré, who had been involved with Gaston d'Orléans in his revolt against the royal authority, and had been wounded in the fighting at Castelnaudary. The son followed in his father's footsteps. At the Hôtel d'Orléans, where he was brought up, he acquired while quite young a taste for debauchery and intrigue, and later on he was prominent amongst the young firebrands in the Fronde. Like all Monsieur's officers he was fickle and frivolous, rich in words

but poor in money, with a knavish heart concealed under a cloak of gay politeness.

Ninon could not withstand the pleading of his wistful eyes, which appeared to reflect such simplicity of soul. She suddenly forgot all about Saint-Etienne, and only her mother's vigilance reminded her that love is not always to be enjoyed in perfect freedom. She began to chafe at this surveillance, and it annoyed her always to have to hide her doings, like a schoolgirl, from her over-zealous supervision. By nature she was singularly frank, and she disliked having to submit to clandestine meetings, but she had to resign herself to it. She used to take up her position for hours at a time behind the curtains of the window which overlooked the Rue des Trois Pavillons, where she lived. From time to time the invalid Madame de Lanclos, suspicious of her quietness, would ask her what she was doing. Ninon would reply that she was embroidering, which was not true, because the embroidery lay idly on her lap. Raré had promised to pass during the afternoon. At length he came and she saw him emerging from a side street. Her heart leapt and she jumped up, letting her sewing fall to the ground. Careless of the consequences, she flew downstairs, reaching the door of the house just as the young nobleman gazed up at the silent window. When Ninon called him

he rushed to her, kissing her on the lips. While they were busily engaged in exchanging tender words they were espied by a beggar, who ambled up and began his whine. They took no notice, and he became importunate, until at length Ninon pulled out her pocket handkerchief, all lace and embroidery, and threw it to him, saying: "There, take this and leave us in peace."

When Madame de Lanclos remarked on the prolonged absence of her daughter and saw her going about with her face lit up with happiness, Ninon could stammer only confused explanations. Her mother would accept them, although she probably did not believe them. She questioned because she felt it was her duty to do so, but she knew that remonstrance was useless, and that Ninon was doomed. Her father's influence persisted in spite of all her wise advice. It seemed almost as if the God upon whom she had relied for so many years now wished to disclaim His responsibility. He increased her feebleness and pointed her to the tomb. Feeling the near approach of death, she contented herself with prayers for her errant daughter, whom she had been powerless to save by the example of her own virtue. Ninon must have realised the gravity of her situation, and she called a halt in her love-making. She found that she loved her mother more tenderly than she had supposed,

although her narrowness of outlook often annoyed her. And during this painful time she nursed her with untiring patience, and may even have promised to follow the road of honour as described by the dying woman.

When at last Madame de Lanclos died Ninon lavished funeral pomp upon her. A band of priests followed the coffin chanting mournful hymns to the accompaniment of swinging censers and lighted candles. Her mother's death and the duties devolving upon her, both before and after, had their effect on Ninon. Her radiant health broke down for a time, and she suddenly felt an urgent need for rest and retirement. She sent away any suitors who had ventured to intrude upon her grief, and broke off her affair with Raré. Solitude, she thought, would enable her to reflect and decide how she was to live out the rest of her own life, so she begged admittance to a convent. It was the custom of ladies of quality thus to seek in the cloisters forgetfulness of their sorrows, and many of them possessed their own rooms at convents, specially at the Carmelite nunnery. The nuns, moreover, always welcomed these penitent boarders. Ninon's irregularities had not yet brought her into disfavour with the religious portion of the community, and she easily obtained the hospitality she sought. She entered the convent a quiet and

saddened girl. No rules were imposed upon her, and nothing was asked of her but an outward show of piety. She might even receive visitors, provided that they did not bring scandal upon the convent; but she determined to avoid all contact with the world. She longed for privacy in which to weep and indulge the grief with which her heart was overflowing. Thus she strove to gain comfort and regain hope. Singing helped her too, and the music of the chants as they echoed through the dim aisles of the chapel filled her soul with peace and comforted her.

Gradually she began to emerge from the melancholy into which her grief had plunged her. Her strength came back and her interest in life was renewed. She looked at the groups of dark-robed figures with their light veils which surrounded her in the corridors of the nunnery and began to wonder whether it would not be better for her to add herself to their number. She, too, would follow with downcast eyes the mother abbess who led her flock like a watchful shepherd, and would obey her blindly and without murmur and never listen again to the stir of the world beyond the high walls of the convent.

But, alas! the faith and innocence which maintain the peace of such immured existences had vanished from her.

Meditating thus, she came to realise that she was not made for such a renunciation, and for the monotonous beauty of such a life. Already the devil was tormenting her in her solitary nights. He called up before her the gay faces of her friends, and told her how she would be missed in the world outside. The temptation was too much for her. She left her peaceful security and returned to the kingdom of joy, to the quarter of the Marais with its eternal whisperings of love and poetry. She had only a small provision of money and no hope that her brothers, even if they were still alive, would rush to her aid and look after her, so she threw open wide the doors of her house. The young sparks hastened to celebrate her return, and it remained to be seen whether they would long leave such a goddess unoccupied and needy.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Ninon emerged, purified, from her convent, at first she did not seem disposed to listen to her admirers. She feared that eventuality which so often causes women to lose their beauty, elegance and wit—in fact, any charm they may possess—and intended to resist the temptations of the flesh until she had made sure of her future. The question before her was how to establish herself without accepting the generous aid of a lover. At the moment Jean Coulon, a member of Parliament, was beseeching her to listen to him. He did not attain to the standard of physical attractiveness upon which she had hitherto insisted in her lovers, and he was an unmannerly ignoramus. When he was not on duty at the High Chamber he was usually to be found quenching his thirst in the taverns of the town. He was frequently to be seen lurching about in the street, cursing at even priests and women, and his arrival in a drawing-room caused general consternation. At one time he had been held in such detestation that the advisability of expelling him from Parliament was actually debated.

The ballad-mongers launched innumerable lampoons against him, satirising his salacity and drunkenness, but instead of taking offence at these insults he only laughed at them. Married to a charming wife, he allowed the financier Emery to contribute money to his housekeeping, and made no bones about shouting to the world at large, "Everyone sleeps with my wife but me," and complaining that even with so much collaboration he could not obtain an heir. Ninon was quite aware of all this, but Coulon offered her five hundred *livres* a month and she admitted him to her intimacy. She did not, however, give up her independence and he had to content himself with happiness in small doles.[1] He declared himself satisfied with this arrangement, and was even so elated by his good fortune that he proclaimed it abroad in the most insolent manner. The bantering rhymesters seized upon his indiscretions. One wrote:

(1) *Chacun sait bien l'étroite union*
D'entre Monsieur et Madame Coulon . . :
Si d'Emery
Fait cocu le mari,
L'autre en conte à Ninon.

[1] According to Tallemant, who is, however, not sure of the facts and does not pretend to be reliable, Coulon made this immoral arrangement with Madame de Lanclos herself. In view of her known character and of the fact that she was already dead when he became familiar with Ninon's house, this seems unlikely.

And another:

(2) *Ne t'étonne pas si Coulon*
Aime la belle Ninon,
Car il a droit de représailles . . .

Verses such as these circulating in ladies' drawing-rooms won for Ninon a sort of jocular renown, and then the following incident occurred.

Madame Coulon, who herself had many lovers, was scandalised to hear of her husband's infidelity, and called down the wrath of all virtuous wives upon Ninon. She cared little, to be sure, that her husband took the love she scorned elsewhere, but she disliked having to bear the cost of his misconduct. She hoped by raising a scandal to evade at least the pecuniary obligation, but she was soon undeceived. Although the virtuous ladies deserted Ninon at her appeal and closed their doors to her, Coulon still continued to haunt her house in the Rue des Trois Pavillons. He openly proclaimed himself the girl's protector, and willy-nilly the common purse continued to pay for this protection. Ninon, who now found herself an outcast from society, lifted the mask and determined henceforward to live openly the life of a courtesan. This decision brought her great relief, because it enabled her to throw away all pretence at prudery and to be done with hypocrisy. Her first task was to find another banker as well as Coulon, whose contribution

was not sufficient. François d'Amboise, Comte d'Aubijoux, came forward.[1] The two men were alike in character and morals, and d'Aubijoux, like his colleague, liked good cheer, lounging in taverns, and every sort of sensual indulgence, but his appearance was more attractive, and he was as daring in war as in the pursuit of pleasure.

Ninon had now to divide her favours between the two rivals without falling a victim to jealousy on their part. She managed this by cunning diplomacy. They both had ground for complaint against her and might equally be discontented, but she soothed them both from time to time with a little cosseting and they were content to wait indefinitely for a renewal of her graciousness. In the meantime they both regretted that they had treated her as a chattel, but consoled themselves with the reflection that but for their money they would never have enjoyed more than the sight of her. This accounts for their longanimity.

Being devoid of fortune, Ninon could not manage entirely without subsidisers, but she despised them. She wanted to follow the dictates of her fancy alone. Love to her was not attractive if it took the form of servitude. In the seventeenth century

[1] D'Aubijoux was chamberlain of Gaston d'Orléans' household, and Goulas in his *Mémoires* relates his devotion to his master.

women of her type were considered cruel and fickle. Any man who, knowing her new profession of courtesan, became friendly with her, might entertain hopes of becoming her lover, but neither his vehemently expressed passion nor urgent pleading alone would soften Ninon. Before she would listen to anyone she must first feel herself physically attracted. At this period her senses spoke with authority and dominated her, but hers was a strangely dual personality, and, although her brain played second fiddle to her heart, it did not abandon its rights completely. She was very fond of good conversation and took great pleasure in the exercise of her intelligence, but her intellectual friends were permitted to enjoy only the treasures of her mind. She disliked terminating a discussion on deeply philosophical matters with carnal relations. After the intellectuals had gone she would open her bower to some mere voluptuary. As a faithful epicurean, she tried thus to maintain the balance between the mind and the body.

She did not yet possess the means of gratifying both sides of her character, since the *salons* were closed to her through the malevolence of Madame Coulon, and she found herself constrained to keep in the circle of the same set of familiar acquaintances. The thought of her quasi-isolation made her anxious to be received at Marion de

Lorme's house. Marion de Lon, called de Lorme, was the famous courtesan around whom at that time the masculine élite of both court and town gathered.[1] The two young women, although so different in character, had common ground in their origins. Marion, like Ninon, belonged to the lesser nobility, but her family sprang from financial circles. For a long time her relations, and her father in particular, Jean de Lon, Seigneur de Lorme and Baron de Baye, President of the Treasury of France in Champagne and a very pious man, fought against her propensity for love. They made the mistake, however, of admitting to their intimacy in the Castle of Baye a certain Jacques Vallée, Sieur des Barreaux, who turned out to be the tempter in charming disguise. He fell in love with Marion with the only true passion he had experienced in the course of his dissipated life, and was determined to let no obstacles stand in the way of obtaining his desire. Circumstances aided in bringing the sentimental girl to his arms. Their love affair grew into a romance. Des Barreaux became for a time a reformed character, and as long as the romance lasted lived in a state of

[1] The most complete work on Marion de Lorme is *Histoire et Légende de Marion de L'orme*, by Josephin Péladan, 1888. See also *Disciples et Successeurs de Théophile de Viau, Des Barreaux, etc.*, by Frédéric Lachevre, 1911, and *Marion de Lorme et ses Parents*, in the *Revue des Etudes Historiques*, April-June, 1923.

ecstasy, forgetting his atheistical blasphemy and even the delights of the bottle. It was her father who kept Marion in check, and when he died she and her mother, who seems to have been her accomplice, left the castle of Baye in Champagne and came to Paris, where they took up their abode in a house in the Place Royale.[1] She did not yet openly acknowledge her love affair, but sheltered it in the seclusion of a pretty little house in the Faubourg Saint Victor.

The capital, however, teemed with fascinating young men of the same type as Des Barreaux, whom in the country she had imagined to be unique. The king of these young dandies and the quintessence of their refinement and elegance was the Marquis de Cinq-Mars. He was to be met everywhere, as beautiful as a dream and followed always by the adoring looks of all the women present. Nothing appeals to sentimental women like melancholy, and his languorous airs soon captured Marion's heart. The story runs that he actually married her, but was released from his conjugal bonds on account of the active jealousy of Louis XIII. Nothing is known for certain about the truth of this rumour. The Grand Prior also

[1] Marion appears always to have lived under her mother's wing. A manuscript in the *Archives Nationales* (K. K. 1826, fo. 21) gives their address at this time. Later on they removed to Rue Thorigny.

made love to Marion, but it is not likely that Marie Louise de Gonzague, Duchess de Nevers, a fierce and haughty woman, allowed herself to be supplanted by a humble coquette from the Marais. Des Barreaux, on the other hand, was hovering in the background, rather neglected, to be sure, but still Marion's lover. Cardinal de Richelieu, when he in his turn paid his addresses to the young woman, found him still there and had to dispute possession with him.

It is evident, therefore, that Marion's train of lovers was an imposing one at the moment when Ninon, who was still living at Rue des Trois Pavillons, made herself known to her as a neighbour. The highest noblemen in the land had been intimate with her and helped to spread her fame. Des Barreaux, tired of her fickleness, had taken his departure, so she had regained her liberty, but twenty other lovers took his place and shared amongst them the burden of her terrible extravagance.

Marion did not possess Ninon's erudition, but she was more beautiful, or at least more feminine. Her dark hair was parted on her forehead and fell over her graceful shoulders in a cloud of silky curls. Her eyes were wide-set, betraying by their sparkle her gaiety of soul and high spirits. Her nose was long and straight, and her mouth small and brilliant and shaped like a summer fruit. Painters have

portrayed her playing the lute and thus displaying her grace and the delicacy of her hands, but they could not portray her proud carriage and her deportment, which was fit for a queen. Her appearance was wont to fill the beholder with awe, but when she spoke the illusion of aloofness was dispelled by her sweet and caressing voice. People liked her at once, and from liking soon passed to love, and few indeed could resist the fascination of her loveliness.

At first the relations between Ninon and Marion were those of friendship and concord. Marion had nothing to fear from the younger girl, and gladly opened to her the doors of the house over which her mother presided. Ninon behaved with tact and discretion, and at first made no attempt to poach upon forbidden territory. She was quite free from ambition, and was content with the little her own talents had brought her. There is no suspicion against her of having gleaned her friend's leavings. She was, moreover, held in far greater respect than Marion was.[1]

When Scarron, already seriously ill and in process of developing the assortment of ailments which afterwards made him such a dismal spectacle,

[1] Tallemant writes of Marion: "Any other woman doing as she did would have brought her family into disrepute; nevertheless everyone treated her with respect." There may have been an outward show of respect, but Gaspard IV. de Coligny wrote of her in quite a different tone (*Archives de Chantilly*, MXXXIII, fo. 199, 3 Aout, 1646).

distributed his rhymed New Year gifts on 1st January, 1643, there is a distinct difference of tone to be noticed. He was chary of wishing Marion anything but love and more love, and he spoke of her with lively sarcasm. To Ninon, on the contrary, he addressed the sincere wish that she might meet a husband worthy of her, and his language reflects his deference :—

(3) *O belle et charmante Ninon,*
A laquelle jamais on ne repondra non
Pour quoi que ce soit qu'elle ordonne,
Tant est grande l'autorité,
Que s'acquiert en tous lieux une jeune personne
Quand, avec de l'esprit, elle a de la beauté,
Puisque, hélas ! à cet an nouveau
Je n'ai rien d'assez bon, je n'ai rien d'assez beau
De quoi vous bâtir une étrenne,

Contentez-vous de mes souhaits.
Je souhaite donc à Ninon
Un mari peu hargneux, mais qui soit bel et bon,
Force gibier tout le carême,
Bon vin d'Espagne, gros marron,
Force argent sans lequel tout homme est triste et blême
Et que chacun l'estime aut ant que fait Scarron.

Scarron, the little canon of Le Mans, soon read to the depths of Ninon's heart and appreciated her exceptional qualities of mind. Probably, therefore, he addressed his wish to her, although at heart he knew its futility, because he feared that lovers would destroy the intellectual and moral beauty he perceived in her.

Some time later he left the Rue de la Tisseranderie to go and live in the suburb of Saint-Germain, where he hoped by the aid of baths to free himself from his rheumatism. When he was making his farewells to his friends in the Marais he did not forget his clever Ninon, but compared her to the heroines of ancient Greece, for whose favours Hellenic warriors strove together in mortal combat. "Too beautiful woman," he called her, and begged her not to be like them, a promoter of discord.

(4) *N'engendre jamais que querelle*
De peur qu'il n'en arrive autant,
Tâchez de n'en pas blesser tant
Et commandez à vous oeillades
De faire un peu moins de malades.

Scarron did not write these lines without a motive. They allude to real incidents, and signify that Ninon had departed from the reserve which until then she had practised in her relations with Marion.

With the approach of winter the young swash-bucklers who had followed Louis de Bourbon, Duc d'Enghien, called *Monsieur le Duc,* to the war in Spain, returned to Paris. These dashing ladies' men had trounced the Spaniard and had no longer to fear strict supervision. Louis XIII. lay on his death-bed and Monsieur le Prince had lost all authority. They belonged to the school of indulgent morality and gave rein freely to their impetuous

natures. Madame la Princesse had herself experienced the pleasures of sin and readily made excuses for them. Madame de Rambouillet was of opinion that through debauchery men sowed their wild oats and prepared themselves for legitimate love. These gay soldiers flocked to Marion's house. They were mostly dashing, cynical and handsome young fellows, who sometimes even inspired Monsieur le Duc to follow their example, although that prince was more prone to words than deeds when he visited ladies' boudoirs.

Roquelaure, wild as a faun, vied in cunning with Toulongeon, who was nicknamed the Prince of Love. Maurice and Gaspard de Coligny, the Du Vigeans, the Chavagnacs, Roussillon and Grammont all hoped to win the fair lady's favours by intrigue. Bouteville and Pisani, although as hunchbacked as Pulcinella, forgot their deformity and dreamt of conquering by their intellectual prowess. Simon and Isaac Arnauld,[1] two jovial carabineers belonging to a religious family which abhorred all vice, tried the effect of their joviality on her heart. Bussy-Rabutin, smiling and self-sufficient, tried to innovate a game of love in which violence was to come to the aid of personal charms. Saint-Evremond, steeped in licentiousness,

[1] Pierre Isaac Arnauld, Sieur de Corbeville, did succeed in becoming Marion's lover.

recited maxims of Epicurus and aspired to winning hearts by captivating intellects. Henri de Chabot was the only one of the band of companions who held aloof. Marguerite de Rohan, waiting in the background to marry him, provided all the love he desired.

This band of warriors brought their poets with them, including Sarasin, the frivolous mouthpiece of the house of Condé, and Voiture, a shining light of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. When they all crowded into Marion's house it resembled a madhouse. Innumerable lights shone from the windows and all was clatter and bustle. Situated in the heart of the Marais, it looked like a veritable temple of pleasure. Marion, however, in spite of all her diligence and kind-heartedness, could not possibly cope with so many lovers. The strange woman, moreover, always deluded herself, when she chose a lover, that their union was going to last for ever, and no other man except those who helped to keep her was allowed to interrupt her passion for him while it lasted.[1]

[1] Several noblemen attached to the household of the Duc d'Enghien, afterwards Prince de Condé, were amongst those who contributed to her upkeep. Amongst others was Louis de Cossé-Brissac. On 20th June, 1647, the Duc de Rohan wrote to the Prince: "I heard yesterday that Madame de Brissac has separated from her husband because of the money he spends on Marion." Tallemant partly confirms this: "Monsieur de Brissac was so jealous of Marion that he rented a house opposite hers in order the better to spy on her."

The others who were passed over for the time being knew there was nothing more to be looked for from her, so, while awaiting their turn, they looked elsewhere for amusement. The impatient ones amongst them set to work to wreck bourgeois homes and some even attempted to woo Ninon, a futile pursuit which exhausted their powers of persuasion. She merely smiled and said nothing, however much she may have felt tempted. Coulon and Aubijoux, kept at arm's length, did not suffice to calm her youthful ardour after months of celibacy.

From amongst the crowd of rollicking subalterns she singled out Gaspard de Coligny, Marquis d'Andelot. He was a descendant of that Admiral Coligny who was butchered through the hatred of the Guises at St. Bartholomew's. Ninon was attracted by his courage, his elegance and the wholesome gaiety which transformed his rather babyish face. But Gaspard, unfortunately, far from responding to her advances, thought only of Marion, had made many plans to capture her and had been worsted in many bouts with her. Ninon was content to await her opportunity, but was unhappy while she waited. In the meantime Marion was distracted because she knew that Coligny would neither be able to satisfy her temperament nor be persuaded to give up his pursuit of her. She



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Gaspard de Coligny, Marquis d'Andelot [90

therefore ordered him, if he desired her favour, to abjure his Protestant faith. The condition was severe, but she hoped thereby to rid herself of an obsessing persecution, or at the least, in yielding to it, to accomplish a pious work. Absurd though it may seem in a courtesan, she was a religious woman. Without hesitation Coligny decided to accept the conditions set by Marion. He was well aware that such an abjuration would bring him the approval of royalty as well as of Marion. Members of his illustrious family were always held in mistrust and suspected of designs prejudicial to the State. He agreed, therefore, to allow a friend of Marion's to teach him the rudiments of Catholicism. Thereafter he passed into the hands of a monk who finished his instruction and led him, purged of his Calvinistic errors, to baptism and the Eucharist. Received into the bosom of the Church, he could now claim the reward of his obedience, which Marion proudly gave him. Hardly had he got into his power this woman in whom other men delighted than he turned from her with loathing and left her. It might be thought he regretted the sorrow he had caused his mother, Anne de Polignac, who was one of the most devoted members of the Protestant Church at Charenton; or that he dreaded the anger of his father, the Maréchal de Châtillon, and the withdrawal of his support

as well as the detestation of all Huguenots, who cursed him as a renegade; but not so. He merely laughed at the resentment let loose against him and prepared to fight it. His brother, Maurice de Coligny, tried to convert Marion to Calvinism, thinking thereby to bring his brother back to the religion of his fathers, but Gaspard scoffed at this futile attempt.

The real reason he thus lightly renounced his faith was not merely to give Marion proof of his love, as memoirs assert. It was more properly a secret love-offering to a young maiden, Isabelle-Angélique de Montmorency, whom he was wooing at the Hôtel de Condé. He knew that so long as he remained a Protestant he would never obtain the consent of her mother, Madame de Montmorency-Bouteville, who was a bigoted Catholic. In that fact is to be found the real reason for the treachery which so greatly agitated the Maréchal de Châtillon and his co-religionists.[1] No one knew that at first, however. Marion herself was astonished at his inexplicable disdain, and Ninon did not show her usual foresight. She thought that d'Andelot had left Marion simply because she did not know how to charm and enthral her lovers, and she made up her mind to give her a lesson. Her own fancy for Coligny had become

[1] See *Madame de Châtillon*, by Émile Magne, 1910.

lukewarm, but it returned stronger than ever when she saw him detached from his mistress. He, alas! gave no sign of reciprocating her passion.

Actuated most probably by an imperious desire that would not be gainsaid, Ninon made an error that she was ever afterwards to regret bitterly. She wrote to Coligny. If he had possessed the least discernment, he would have appreciated at its real value the honour she did him in sending him this letter; but, alas! the emotion betrayed by Ninon in her large and sprawling handwriting did not win him, and it was curiosity alone that took him to her side. Finding himself plunged into the rhapsodies of an ardent love affair, he was intensely bored, and having no passion to match her transports, he soon became tired of being an object of adoration. Ninon was in despair. She could not but perceive the indifference of this swain whom she had set herself to enrapture, and in order to win whom she had sacrificed the friendship of Marion, who was showing her jealousy in bitter accusations.

She would not, however, give up her happiness without a struggle, and poured forth her grief with such eloquence to La Moussaye, who tried to console her, that he undertook to bring back the fugitive. He did bring him back, and for a while there was peace; but physical insufficiency in a lover,

without real inclination, is poor consolation to a woman in love, and Ninon's passion declined rapidly. Newsmongers kept her supplied with rumours of what was going on. Coligny's marriage with Isabelle-Angélique de Montmorency was regarded almost as a public calamity, and the enraged Huguenots tried by all sorts of underhand means to prevent it. Ere long the young officer was forced to go to Holland.

Ninon was distracted for a short time, but recovered her equanimity and took up life again with a gleam of battle in her eyes. Her devastating experience had matured her, and henceforth her heart was seldom allowed to follow the dictates of her senses. She began to disdain the raptures of fleeting love, and reserved herself entirely for the more durable emotions of friendship.

CHAPTER V

TRADITION asserts that Ninon's father eventually returned to Paris from the foreign lands where he had been expiating his crime, and entered the household of that Paul de Gondi, who afterwards became Cardinal de Retz. Biographers give various dates for Henri de Lanclos' death, some earlier and some later, and according to one of them he was killed by the Comte de Harcourt at the village of La Bouille, near Rouen. It is impossible to disentangle the real truth from so many hypotheses, nor would the circumstances and time of his death matter in the least if it were not for the suggestion that Ninon received further instruction at the bedside of her dying parent.

"Be more particular with regard to the quality of your pleasures than their number," the confirmed epicurean is said to have admonished her; and the words, whether or not they were really uttered, should be recorded, because we find Ninon acting upon them, at least in the first half of her life.

Having terminated her affair with Coligny, Ninon wasted no time in repining; but the young officer's inconstancy had given her ground for

reflection. She pondered the social inferiority of her sex and the apparent injustice of this, and asked herself why behaviour which is censured in a woman should be condoned, and even applauded, in a man. The common attitude towards love in particular seemed to her to exemplify the fallibility of human judgment, and it disgusted her that men should, in the exercise of a natural function, arrogate to themselves a measure of independence which they refused to women. The time seemed ripe to shake off this bondage. She realised that her fellow-women, crushed as they were by centuries of submission, would not dare to follow her in open revolt, but she felt strong enough to stand up for her own opinion without their support. She published no manifesto, and relied upon the contagion of example alone to attract followers.

"Men enjoy a thousand times more liberty than women, therefore I shall live as a man," she asserted.

Her decision won her the awe of the timid and the censure of the austere. The hangers-on at Court and the haunters of ladies' alcoves approved of her bold design. They thought that it was a pose to cloak her complacency, and did not in the least grasp the significance of her bid for freedom. Anyone who took this first attempt at feminine revolt seriously was simply laughed at, but dozens of women, both married and single, who would

not openly utter a single word in favour of her doctrines, admired Ninon in secret and modelled themselves upon her. Later on they raised the mask, and the time came when the proudest and most highly-placed beauties in the kingdom sought out the serenely-minded courtesan in order to learn her precepts and rules for the conduct of life.

At the period under discussion, however, they were all jealous of her for having taken their lovers away from them. Her drawing-room was always crowded with men. It is not known whether she had broken entirely with her family, but there are some indications that she came into contact occasionally with her aunt, Madeleine de la Marche, who had married Pierre d'Abra de Raconis, and she may have received visits from Charles François d'Abra de Raconis, Bishop of Lavaur, who had obtained his mitre through the favour of Richelieu. There was no blood tie between the two, but Ninon nevertheless called him her uncle.

D'Abra knew all about the frailer inhabitants of this world. It was his mission to reclaim them, and he devoted himself to it with zeal. If he went occasionally to visit Ninon he would find nothing in her surroundings to disgust him. She allowed, as a matter of fact, no incivility in her presence, and required absolute propriety from her guests. She hated vulgarity even more than bigotry.

However many people had the freedom of her house, they were all carefully selected. Besides the deserters from Marion's circle, there were other elegant youths who were glad to linger in the vicinity of their enslaver, and counted upon their youth to bring them the accomplishment of their desires. They were good company, albeit audacious and unscrupulous, and by their aid the libertine circle, which had been scattered through the influence of the religious party, began to regain its power. They all had their places in history, whether by the scandals they caused at Court, the violence they let loose with the Fronde, or their vicious philosophy, which in the opinion of many people poisoned the whole life of France in the eighteenth century.

Ninon found it no easy task to keep her circle in order. She had to be on her guard lest, like so many tigers, they pounced upon her unawares and gobbled her up or tore her to pieces amongst them. She watched over them, allowing no exhibitions of passion, and compelling them to keep to the paths of discretion and concord. It would be vain to search for any quarrel that might be attributed to their rivalry. Dark and fair, but all alike charming, with their lace furbelows and their ardent looks, they sat around on cushions, gossiping about other things, their minds filled with a hope which they might never realise.

Among these impatient suitors were the Comte de Palluau, the Marquis de Vardes and de Créquy, the Chevalier de Méré, the wild Marquis de Jarzé, who had dared to raise his amorous glances so high as to the Queen, Anne of Austria; also coxcombs young and old, and finally the Maréchal d'Estrée, a past master of gallantry. All these made it evident by their example that hope deferred could be a delightful state in which to linger. Others, however, sought to forget their distress by throwing themselves into deep intrigues, and tried to occupy their minds with politics to the exclusion of love. Alexandre d'Elbène, the cynical philosopher, for example, took a hand in the plots of his master, Gaston d'Orléans. Others, notably the Chevalier de Méré, who were more cultivated and refined, gave themselves up to philosophical speculations. The most formidable to deal with were those who lived only for the gratifications of their senses, like the Comte de Miossens, a Gascon with beaming countenance and greedy nature, who suffered from a lack of eloquence. He stuttered over everything he tried to say, but the impediment did not deter him in his quest for fortune. The Duchesse de Rohan put at his disposal both her heart and her purse, and he broke the one and pillaged the other. Then he embarked gaily on a career in the course of which he acquired a

marshal's baton and numerous orders by the accomplishment of the ignoble feat of arresting the princes during the Fronde. It was for his vices, however, that he was best known. He showed such unscrupulousness in their pursuit that women began to be afraid of him. The mere appearance of his sly face in a drawing-room was enough to make the most hardened of them gather her scarf about her neck.

Ninon was not afraid of his fiery temperament, and he was skilful enough to attract her attention at the appropriate moment. It was her custom from time to time to choose a new lover from the circle of her familiar friends. Miossens had his turn, and so did Méré and Jarzé. It is not known, nor does it matter, in what order they came. Méré was puffed up with vanity and blinded by the certainty that he was an altogether superior being. Knowing that Ninon admired his refinement and intelligence, he attempted to instruct her, presuming that her mind was not equal to his in depth and subtlety. He admired her figure and the divine harmony of her physical being, but he was a poor psychologist and could not see beyond her exterior. He failed to understand her real intelligence or to appreciate her moral beauty. Seeking to analyse the eurythmy of her beauty and the charm of her perfect figure, without allowing her either heart

or mind, he wrote: "Ninon reminds me of those beautiful stanzas of Malherbe's." It was an absurd evaluation, but flattering all the same.

Ninon did not like her lovers to criticise her qualities of heart or mind. The secrets of her spiritual life were as a closed garden to them, and they were merely birds of passage that she had welcomed to her boudoir. Méré, Miossens and Jarzé were sent on their way as soon as she had exhausted their capacity of ministering to her pleasure. D'Andelot had cured her of her desire for constancy, and men became to her so many marionettes, with which she played for an instant, then tossed aside ere the game was fairly finished.[1]

[1] Tallemant asserts that Ninon had a son by Miossens and another by Méré. It may be so. He knew Ninon very well. She was his neighbour, the mistress of his brother-in-law, Antoine Rambouillet, and the intimate friend of his sister-in-law, Madame de la Sablière. No trace, however, can be found of these offspring. According to less well-informed biographers, Ninon also had a son by Jarzé, who was called the Chevalier de Villiers. The Duc de Luynes was the first to record the story of this child; but he writes from hearsay. According to him, Ninon had the Chevalier de Villiers brought up in ignorance of his origin. Later the youth is supposed to have become enamoured of his mother, who thereupon told him the truth about his birth, with the result that he committed suicide. This drama is said to have occurred in 1672, when Ninon was fifty-two years old. It does not fit in with what we know of her character. No contemporary of Ninon's mentions it, and Luynes as a chronicler is not considered reliable. No importance should be attached to this tale, although Bret and Douxmenil repeat it without verification.

"That will do. Go and try your luck elsewhere," she used to say when she grew tired of them. Being no longer lovers, however, they might become friends, sure of a welcome to the pleasant conviviality of her house; but she rarely, if ever, experienced any return of her old fancy for any of them. Her own words are helpful in trying to elucidate the mystery of her psychology:

"There are some fortunate souls who are able to find in love reasons for continuing to love." From this it would appear that she did not reckon herself amongst these fortunate beings, and she hastens indeed to make this clear:

"It is stupid of poets to give Cupid a torch, quiver and bow, since his real power lies within his fillet. When one loves one does not think. As soon as one begins to think, love dies."

Ninon, however, was much given to reflection, hence her inconstancy. Nobody knew better than she how to make the most of the present. She enjoyed each day without worrying about the future and what it might bring. And so doing she was able to assert with authority:

"Nature provides nothing more varied than the pleasures of love, although they are always the same."

Cast-off lovers do not usually accept their lot with calm resignation, but Ninon's did, thanks to

her wonderful tact. She was, moreover, well aware of her own cleverness and of the esteem in which she was held.

"It needs a hundred times more skill to make love than to command an army," she said. It also requires an equal amount of freedom from constraint and interference. Ninon knew this and made no bones about it. Her lovers well knew the terms upon which they were crowned with happiness, and it behoved anyone who aspired to be more than a passing fancy to take his wooing elsewhere, since Ninon held out no promise of placid constancy. On the contrary she used to proclaim openly:

"I am having my twentieth affair."

One day Ninon singled out Louis de Bourbon, Duc d'Enghien, to be one of the band of passing fancies or "fortunate fellows," as Saint-Simon calls them. This leader of the troop of young blades did not disdain to share their orgies and even, at a pinch, to put up with their leavings. Through the common wish of Cardinal de Richelieu and the Prince de Condé, and in spite of his love for gentle Marthe du Vigean, he had been tied for life to Claire-Clémence de Maille-Brézé, whom he hated. He detested her more than ever when sorrow drove his love to hide her disappointment in the Carmelite convent, and tried to forget in soldiering that princes

have no right to follow the inclination of their hearts.

Women saw in him the fierce warrior who had brought Spanish pride to the dust, and they adored him. But he would have none of them. He meant to keep intact the laurel crown which circled the brow above his haughty, rugged and eagle-like face, and he had little appetite for campaigning in ladies' chambers. It was even hinted that sodomy was more to his taste. Occasionally, however, he did yield to a pair of pleading eyes, but not for long. Ladies who dreamt of reviving the idyll of *Omphale* in his company were woefully deceived. Ninon, luckily, had no such romantic desires. The Duc d'Enghien sought her out of curiosity, and they understood each other without need of words. By the light of the candles she watched him disrobing. A young Hercules with muscles hardened by military exercise and riding, bulging out of gleaming flesh. Her anticipation was aroused, and she murmured to herself the Latin adage; *pilosus aut fortis, aut libidinosus.* Ere morning broke she knew that Monsieur le Duc did not possess the latter quality.

"Ah! How strong you must be!" she cried.

Unfortunately no chronicler has preserved the prince's reply for us, but he was not the sort of man to take exception to a just description, and he

became one of the friendly and deferential dialecticians who came to talk philosophy with her in their spare time. Ninon had had enough of valour without concupiscence, and began to rely more upon chance encounters.

She was very fond of driving in the *Cours*, where gaiety and unconstraint were the order of the day. There were to be seen all sorts of amusing sights, elegance and wealth were paraded and flirtations indulged in. One could keep track of old love affairs and discover new ones while breathing the balmy air straight from the Seine Valley, laden with the scent of the woodland.

Two grooms bore Ninon's chair, mincing their steps in rhythm lest they should unduly shake their precious burden. She was clad in a gown of white tabby sprinkled with bunches of roses, and she fanned herself gently to the soothing sway of her chair. In the midst of her yellow-striped satin she appeared as if bathed in sunshine, and mirrors reflected the fresh beauty of her complexion in its frame of black lace. Sometimes she would throw open the taffeta curtains which hid the interior of the chair and return the salutations of gentlemen who had recognised her livery and armorial bearings. Some of the women threw envious or spiteful glances in her direction, but many watched her progress with sympathetic smiles. Ere long some

of the more daring souls would come to walk beside her, leaving the steps of carriages with whose occupants they had been frivolling a moment before. Scandalmongers came to tell her the news of the day, gathered in the antechambers of courtiers, the galleries of the Palace, or the gardens of the Tuileries and the Arsenal. She would be obliged to halt her bearers and would sit there gaily gossiping, while she watched the parade of carriages and strollers. Under her veil her eyes sparkled with gaiety, and nothing escaped her notice. The Maréchal de Grammont stood up in his carriage and signalled to a cavalier, who dismounted, threw the reins to a groom and went across to speak to him. Ninon had never seen this tall, handsome fellow before, and she liked the look of him. He thrilled her and she enquired who he might be. Philippe de Montaut-Bénac, Comte de Navailles, they told her, was a brave and circumspect officer of good family in command of an infantry regiment. The king looked upon him with favour and Cardinal Mazarin was his patron. He was just the sort of loyal officer who would eventually find his devoted service rewarded with a marshal's baton.

Ninon was strongly attracted and was delighted to hear him described as such a fine fellow. Hesitating no longer, she sent one of her valets to Navailles with a note she had hastily scribbled on

her tablets, the while she serenely continued the conversation she had begun.

When finally she left the *Cours* the Count rode by her side, and she discovered that he was both intelligent and gallant. They returned together to her house in the Marais, where they dined to the accompaniment of compliments and caresses. Ninon looked forward to the nocturnal reward of her generosity. Their meal finished, she led the cavalier, still dazzled by his adventure, to her bedroom.

"Go to bed; you will soon have company," she told him, and passed into the next room.

Not being one of those careless women who think that nudity unadorned is sufficient to entice a man, she embarked upon a careful and elaborate toilet. Her tirewoman removed her head-dress, unlaced the straight corset which girded her form, and sponged her with orange-flower water. With slow and gentle movements skilfully she combed and curled her mistress's long hair, perfumed it, and put on it a nightcap of lace and ribbons. Ninon then donned a nightgown of fine linen and Malines point lace, threw a wrap of patterned Indian cloth lined with blue over her shoulders, took an aniseed dragee out of a jade box and swallowed it. Then her preparations were complete.

With purposeful air she entered the room

where she imagined her companion to be eagerly awaiting her. Hardly had she crossed the threshold than she stopped dumbfounded, greeted by—a snore. In dealing with warriors the consequences of fatigue must be borne in mind, and Ninon had made the mistake of being too long about her toilet. She gazed down at this handsome swain who could drop asleep so carelessly while he awaited the approach of radiant love. Rage seized her, and she longed to have him beaten and thrown out into the street. How envious women and scoffing young blades would laugh at her if they could see her thus, watching over the sleeping wretch like any guardian angel!

Gradually, however, her wrath subsided. She saw her mistake, but determined to have some revenge, however trivial. Taking the sleeper's clothes and arms with her, she retired, after giving orders that she was to be wakened at break of day. Next morning Navailles, still heavy with sleep, heard a great noise in the room. He perceived a youth, who flourished a sword at him and threatened to kill him.

"Hold," he cried, "I am a man of honour and will give you satisfaction."

A burst of laughter greeted him and, opening his eyes wider, he recognised Ninon, clad from head to foot in his own clothes. He realised that he

had gone to sleep and forgotten her, and, covered with confusion, began to stammer excuses. Ninon had spent a restless night forcing herself to forgive him and she now expected to be reassured as to the sincerity of his vows, but she was taking no risks this time. Tearing off coat and breeches, she sent garments flying into every corner of the room. Alas! Navailles showed himself unbelievably apathetic in fulfilling his duty, and this renewed futility doubled instead of calmed his indulgent hostess's anger. She made no further attempt to captivate him, but left him to return to the servitude of the Court, for which he was plainly better fitted. It might be supposed that Ninon would now be finished for ever with her fancies, but not so. All that the Navailles episode taught her was that, as regards vigorous love-making, fair men do not come up to dark ones, so she developed a preference for the latter.

Navailles was succeeded almost immediately by Pierre de Villars, whose handsome appearance and martial bearing had led people to compare him with a well-known hero of romance and nickname him Villars-Oroondate.[1] In character he was a conglomeration of passions and virtues, and his

[1] Oroondate, hero of La Calprenède's romance called *Cassandre*. Colombey and other biographers of Ninon make Oroondate the hero of Madeleine de Scudery's romance, *Le Grand Cyrus*.

warlike achievements were as famous in the army as was his prowess in gallantry in the ladies' drawing-rooms. Ninon had read without any great enthusiasm the ten volumes of La Calprenède, which depicted the romantic side of her new friend's character. In the book Oroondate pursued a fleeing Cassandre across a thousand obstacles. Ninon had no desire to emulate this heroine, but preferred to think of herself as Statira, whom the hero came upon scantily clad in a dark grotto and kissed upon the lips in a very frenzy of delight. Cassandre hoped, but Statira experienced! Ninon was no mere visionary dweller in the land of beautiful dreams. She had little use for the complications with which the romantics encumbered love. Love for her was a simple act whose accomplishment should follow the preliminaries without undue delay. Villars-Oroondate must have appealed to her more than ever on closer acquaintance, because she committed a very foolish action for his sake.

Paris was then in the grip of the Fronde, and Ninon's friends were scattered. Some for and some against Mazarin, they were nearly all engaged in adding to the tumult in the streets. Promenades, dialectics and gatherings of any sort became unsafe. The populace had broken loose, and bands of ribald youths and girls paraded the streets of the town, which was, moreover, but

poorly defended by the royal troops. The nation seemed to have lost all sense of decency, and showed its debasement in an outbreak of scurrilous mazarinades.

Ninon felt as if she had been plunged in the mire, longed to escape from it, and wondered whither she could go. Villars - Oroondate was going on military duty to a province which was still calm, and she begged him to take her with him. Of course, he could not do so. A woman hampers the movements of a soldier. He tried to make her understand this, but she was not inclined to listen to reason. When he, stern warrior, mounted his horse to proceed to Lyons, and thence to the army, he thought that Ninon was resigned to breaking off the affair. He was greatly mistaken. For the first time in her life she decided to go adventuring, and gave chase to the fugitive. She, too, would become a heroine of romance. Ninon always did the opposite of what an ordinary woman might be expected to do. If only some romantic of the time had taken the trouble to write her life, what a scorn of convention he would have had to display in showing a lady thus pursuing her lover through so many dangers. Ninon had already made herself a man in morals; now she thought she had better become one in appearance, so she attired herself in the garb of a cavalier, hung a sword at her side

and departed with a pistol in her hand. In her desire to go quickly she would not even wait for a place in a passenger coach, but made the journey by post-chaise among the bags of letters, risking an attack by highwaymen, who had been rendered daring by the enfeeblement of the royal power.

When the scandalmongers heard of her exploit they spread the rumour that she had gone into the provinces to cure some indisposition. Ninon did not care what they said. She was too intent upon finding the ungrateful fellow who had so fascinated her, if only for a few hours.

Alas! there is no record that she was repaid for her trouble, and we know, on the contrary, that during her stay at Lyons she passed through a terrible attack of melancholy. What else but a bitter disappointment could have led her to shut herself up again in a convent? The circumstances of her disappointment are not recorded, nor is it known in what religious order she sought hospitality; but evidently libertinage had not quite poisoned her soul, since she sought refuge from her grief in religion.

Whatever glimmerings of piety she preserved, however, were speedily dispelled by a shepherd of the flock of nuns among whom she was temporarily staying. In the course of a visit to the convent the Bishop of Lyons, Alphonse du Plessis, Cardinal

de Richelieu, noticed the beautiful and gentle-eyed penitent. He was a little mad, so people said, and of all the army of relations whom his younger brother, the cardinal-minister, loaded with benefices and wealth, he had been the hardest to settle in life. Although wearing the robe of a Carthusian monk his excesses had driven a gentleman into beating him; so he was made a prelate, as the only thing to be done. For a long time he directed the diocese of Aix, then he was given that of Lyons. To hear his panegyrist, the Abbé de Pure, who eulogised him in Latin, one would suppose he possessed all the virtues, especially the cardinal ones. But that was far from being the case. His frivolous little soul was saturated in pride, and he was often to be seen in his red satin robe broidered in gold, thinking himself God Almighty as he ministered justice to the sinners here below. No one took any notice of him. Such aberrations were a family failing. Even Charles III.'s minister used often to imagine that he had turned into a horse.

The Richelieus were afflicted also with a passion for luxury and pleasure, which even prayer would not drive out. The Bishop of Lyons was fond of the company of the fair sex, and the beautiful ladies of Lyons used to invite him to their parties. He did not think he was offending the Deity nor

derogating from the dignity of a bishop by joining in their little games. And even when they took it into their heads to act scenes from *l'Astrée* he was quite willing to lay aside his soutane and cross and don the beribboned rags of a shepherd with a crook in his hand. It might be thought that a prelate of his importance would have been very angry when he found that the devil himself had been insinuated into a convent in the fair form of Ninon. But far from being angry and setting to work to exorcise her, he proceeded to display a quite culpable amount of amiability. He asked her about her plans for the future, and Ninon replied that she was out of love with life and wished to withdraw from the world, even if it were necessary to make her vows and take the veil. The Bishop always refused to consecrate to God what he called the dregs of humanity, that is to say, the halt and maimed and other deformities whose families wanted to vow them to the Church, so he should have been enthusiastic about the renunciation of such a beautiful penitent.

He must have thought, however, that it would be more pleasing to God if he used her for his own service. He hated the thought of her face being hidden under the coif and her tender body being clothed in sackcloth, and tried by all sorts of follies to turn her from her purpose. He

refused to leave the convent, and openly displayed the disgraceful spectacle of his concupiscence.

He was no longer young, and his eccentric appearance did not help to make him more attractive. It bored Ninon to have to listen to his stale attempts at gallantry, and she thought it too much altogether that love should follow her even into the convent. Besides, if she were really fated never to escape from love, she would prefer not to soil it with sacrilege. Any religious feeling she had had left was now dead for ever. How could it be otherwise when one of the most important prelates in France abjured his vows of chastity before her?

Once more she returned to the world. Lyons was not a fitting frame for the evolutions of a sophisticated Parisian. Its streets were muddy and its atmosphere smoky, while its walls and fortifications seemed to be about to crush it. The inhabitants were a morose lot, consisting of a poverty-stricken populace, a haughty bourgeoisie, and a sprinkling of nobles and officers. Still, it provided her with a safe retreat whilst the Fronde ravaged the capital.

The incontinent young woman, upon whom solitude always weighed heavily, found, however, some consolation. A certain wealthy idler, Marc-Antoine Pérachon, made her acquaintance and was immediately transfixed by Cupid's arrow. At first

he did not dare to declare his love, but begged Ninon to allow him to visit her and to accept the gift of a house worth eight thousand crowns in recognition of her forbearance. Ninon allowed this simpleton to visit her on condition that he kept quiet in a corner. Gradually his shyness wore off and he began to grow more familiar. Then his wits came back, and he began to think it was absurd to have made a gift without receiving any return for it. He tried to caress her, but Ninon snubbed him. He did not appeal to her fancy. He flew into a rage, which was the height of tactlessness. Ninon was annoyed, and returned him his house after throwing him out of it.

The vulgarity of this provincial affair probably made her desire to return to Paris, for she suddenly reappeared there in the midst of the Fronde, fully resolved to make up by an orgy of gaiety for the dullness and annoyance she had endured in her exile. She revelled anew in the pleasures of her little kingdom of the Marais, and her friends crowded back to her. They began again to hope for her favours, but she decided to follow her fancy as before. The highest nobles in the land were helpless to win her unless she so desired, and neither wealth nor disinterested proofs of love would touch her heart so long as her senses remained unmoved.

Alexander, Chevalier de Vendôme, natural son

of Henry IV. and Gabrielle d'Estrée, immediately came forward to support her. This inconsequent jester and erstwhile ballet-dancer was Grand Prior of France, and thought that, thanks to his natural charms and high rank, he had only to ask in order to obtain. He was flabbergasted to find himself relegated to the common ruck of suitors. Such treatment made him keener, and he resolved to conquer at any price, but he succeeded only in being treated with smiling disdain. He supplicated, but his prayers remained unanswered. Rage worked an unusual transformation in him : it turned him into a poet. One day, on leaving Ninon's house, he slipped a letter amongst the knick-knacks on her toilet-table. Ninon's curiosity was aroused. She opened it and found the following quatrain :

(5) *Indigne de mes feux, indigne de mes larmes,*
Je renonce sans peine à tes faibles appas :
Mon amour te prêtait des charmes,
Ingrate, que tu n'avais pas.

Of course, Ninon had only to glance in her mirror to reassure herself if she were inclined to feel hurt at this insult. She knew the impertinent fellow was actuated only by spite. She could refuse to receive him, of course, but she did not see what good that would do. If, however, she calmed him down and at the same time taught him a lesson, he might become a friend, so she took up her own tablets

and dashed off her reprimand. Later in the day Monseigneur de Vendôme received it.

(6) *Insensible à tes feux, insensible à tes larmes,*
Je te vois renoncer à mes faibles appas ;
Mais si l'amour prête des charmes,
Pourquoi n'en empruntais-tu pas ?

The peevish fellow could find no reply to this. Gradually his disappointment subsided, and he began to return to Ninon's house again. Instead of playing an active part in her life, he fell into the bitter-sweet rôle of confidant. He even had a share in the comedy with which the Sévigné household was regaling the town. It was a rollicking farce, and the actors were the Marquise and Bussy-Rabutin on the one hand and Ninon and the Marquis on the other. They played their parts for all they were worth. The Marquis had passed by one day. He was virile and handsome, and Ninon saw him and coveted him. She did not enquire whether he were worthy of her esteem, and it mattered little to her that he was a libertine. She appropriated him and planned a couple of joyous weeks with him. Sévigné had no compunction about subjecting his wife to the humiliation of such a public infidelity. He had already accustomed her to a lonely heart and hearth.

The day after the first meeting Sévigné met Bussy-Rabutin and said to him :

"I spent the pleasantest night possible."

The other looked at him enquiringly. He was in love with the Marquise and did not appreciate the confidence. Sévigné replied reassuringly:

"You may be sure it was not with your cousin, but with Ninon."

"So much the worse for you!" exclaimed Bussy. "My cousin is worth a thousand of her, and I am sure that if it were not that she is your wife she would be your mistress."

"Probably," replied the Marquis indifferently.

Sévigné departed, and Bussy, full of hope, ran to tell the tale to the Marquise. Another woman thus openly betrayed might have listened eagerly to the plans for reprisal of which the Count was full. The vaudevillists took part and sang:

(7) *Approuvez un dessein*
Que l'amour autorise;
Vous resistez en vain
Madame la Marquise.
Car Bussy-Rabutin
Ne quitte jamais prise . . .
Ce n'est pas le chemin
Par où l'on canonise.
Mais qui veut être saint,
Qu'il se voue à l'église,
Approuvez le dessein
Que l'amour autorise.

Madame de Sévigné, however, poured forth her mortification in her letters in a torrent of words.

When Bussy told her of this latest misfortune she exclaimed:

"He has not much to boast of in that conquest."

"Don't pretend to believe that," said Bussy, "or you will soon see the consequences."

"I think you must be mad to give me such advice. Or perhaps you think I am mad," she replied.

"You will be much more so," the young man replied insidiously, "if you do not give him tit for tat. Revenge yourself, dear cousin, and the revenge will be mine too, because your interests are as dear to me as my own."

He thought he had almost persuaded her, but her gentle soul revolted against the idea in spite of her grief.

"Perhaps, Count, I am not as angry as you suppose," she said.

Bussy was quite discomfited at that. But he still hoped that in time her pride would be humbled. Sévigné showed no intention of reforming, but seemed on the contrary to glory in the affair. When he met the Count one day in the *Cours* he got into his carriage and said:

"I wager that you have told your cousin what I said about Ninon, because she has been at me about it."

"No, I have never mentioned it to her," denied Bussy; "but she is clever and talked so

much to me about jealousy that she hit upon some of the truth."

Sévigné contented himself with this vague assurance. All he cared about in any case was to boast of his good fortune.

"There are," he said, "a thousand advantages about being in love. I would like to remain in love all my life, and I love Ninon as much as it is possible to love. To-night I shall spend with her at Saint-Cloud, where Vassé is giving a party for us. We will make fun of him together."

If we are to believe what he says, Bussy then tried to point out to the Marquis the danger of his attitude, since even the purest of women tire eventually of being neglected. A day comes when they realise the futility of the struggle, then they weaken and begin to lend an ear to cajolery. From the first weakening to the final defeat is only a step. A skilful lover is always able to anticipate the moment of the fateful crisis.

These are lies of Bussy's, however. He himself was playing the part of skilful lover, and it would hardly have suited his purpose to moralise thus. He deserved a better fate, but it was written that the bonds between him and his charming cousin were never to be drawn any closer. Counting on her weakening, he addressed an impassioned love-letter to her, and as it happened it was the Marquis

who opened it. He began to understand things. Bussy was expelled forthwith from the house in which he had dreamt of establishing his influence permanently.

Ninon, as it happened, avenged him. Sévigné had had his allotted weeks of love and she speedily dismissed him, bidding him seek elsewhere for someone more worthy to replace her. Then, not content with having robbed the Marquise of her frivolous husband, she had no mercy on the poor woman and took from her Rambouillet and Vassé, the only admirers left besides Bussy and Miossens to assure her of her fascination. To one of them, Antoine Rambouillet, Sieur of La Sablière, Ninon wrote :

"I think I shall love you for three months, which is infinity for me."

He asked for no more, being a fickle individual who celebrated all his conquests in lyrics. Incapable of lasting sentiment, he was therefore free from jealousy. While he was still in possession of her he allowed the impertinent hussy to say to him :

"Tell me, is So-and-so handsome, because I badly need a change ? "

This fair-haired swain helped, in spite of his fame with the ladies, to confirm Ninon in her opinion of blondes. She found the change which her inconstant nature demanded in Henri-François,

Marquis de Vassé. By some strange fatality all the women who had bestowed their favours upon this Marquis had ended their days in convents, and Ninon wanted to know why the love of this vain man required to be expiated with penance. Vassé had been hovering around her for a long time without making any impression, and he could not understand that his great fortune did not make up for his lack of intelligence. Ninon wanted to chasten his vanity before she listened to him, and it was an easy enough task. When he spoke to people he used to breathe into their faces with a tainted breath. One day she brought the conversation adroitly round to the subject of diseases of the stomach.

"I never worry about anything like that; I am never bothered by my stomach," said Vassé.

"I can quite believe it," retorted Ninon. "You leave that to your friends."

The man was duly humiliated, and his manner immediately became less pompous.

Ninon kept this dullard only for a very short time, then she grew so tired of him that she began to understand why her predecessors were still repenting of ever having tolerated him. He modestly consented to swell the numbers of subsidisers in order not to be dismissed entirely from her presence.

CHAPTER VI

THERE is much contemporary evidence to enlighten us as to Ninon's character. The chroniclers are unanimous in praising her intelligence, but disagree as to her personal appearance.

Tallemant de Réaux says:

"As far as beauty is concerned, Ninon never had very much, but she always had a great deal of charm."

Somaize, the historian of the *précieuses*, writing about the same time, is still harder to please:

"She is a very thoughtful woman," he said of Nidalia (Ninon), "who gives way to a degree of melancholy of which people who only see her in company would not believe her capable, since in public she always appears charming and full of a vivacity of spirit which makes her sought after by all those who enjoy conversing with witty people. With regard to beauty, although she is so well versed in the art of attracting love, it must still be granted that her mind is more attractive than her face, and that many people would escape her thralls if they did no more than look at her."

Tallemant had no prejudice against Ninon, with

whom he was very friendly, so his judgment would seem to be sincere; but he knew the heroine of his *historiette* only late in life. Somaize may have had reasons for disliking a woman who was too far removed from the conventionality of the *précieuses* for his taste. Two romantic writers who cannot be suspected of partiality, since they reproved the vices of the courtesan, give the lie direct to these two chroniclers. One of them, Madeleine de Scudéry, in *Clélie*, and the other, Angélique Petit, in *Amour Eschapé*, describe Ninon under the pseudonyms of *Clarice* and *Pythie*, the mother of all carnal attraction.

It would be difficult to judge between two such opposite opinions if, luckily, two famous painters, Louis Ier Elle, called Ferdinand, and Pierre Mignard, had not left us their verdict on canvas. One of these portraits is preserved at the Royal Museum of Brussels and shows Ninon as a young woman wearing the thoughtful air of a philosopher. From it we can form our own opinion of her charms without listening to Tallemant (for whom no woman in Paris equalled his own wife for beauty), Somaize, who was prejudiced, or the two romantics who were too much addicted to the use of hyperbole. In this portrait Ninon certainly appears worthy of admiration and love. Her heavy chestnut hair, with its golden glint, frames the perfect oval of her

face and falls in silky ringlets over her neck and shoulders. Her head is small and shapely and is mounted on a supple and deliciously-modelled neck. She wears a collar of large pearls, which enhance the beauty of her complexion and set off the pure lines of her neck. Her bodice of blue tabby, also decorated with pearls and bordered with lace, veils a bust with proportions fit for a goddess. Her forehead is serene and broad and full of character. Dark eyes sparkle under a pair of thick, arched brows, eyes which do more mischief than any others in the world, mingling gravity with sweetness. The straight and delicate nose prepares us for that wonderful mouth which gave her face its fascination, a charming little mouth, with full rosy lips which seem made for kisses and laughter. Her complexion was of milk and roses and velvet. The whole picture seems to come to life as one looks at it, illustrating Ninon's remark that " Beauty without grace is like a hook without bait."

Ninon's panegyrists extol her modesty and diffidence as well as her elegant and graceful carriage and perfectly-proportioned figure. They also praise her skill as a dancer and a musician and say that her voice was very charming. Madeleine de Scudéry and Angélique Petit both tell of her goodness of heart and insist on her generosity, disinterestedness and affectionate nature, as well as her constancy.

Nearly all her contemporaries who wrote of her dwell on the quality of her mind and on her erudition. Tallemant alone writes of her culture sarcastically, while tracing for us its gradual evolution.

"Charleval, Elbène and Miossens," he says, "had a lot to do with turning Ninon into a courtesan. She maintains that there is no harm in what she has done, and pretends to have no religious beliefs. Through them," he adds, "she has learnt to discuss philosophy. She reads nothing but Montaigne and lives according to his principles."

There we have in a few lines Ninon's intellectual and moral polity as it was at this period of her life. It is unlikely, however, that Charleval or Miossens had such a great influence on her mind, since, as we have seen, her whole education was dominated by the idea of epicureanism. She had been indifferent to religious questions for a long time and had succeeded in contenting herself with a life modelled on epicureanism and lived in the pursuit of pleasure. Unfortunately, pleasure-loving people in her time were all freethinkers, and Ninon, through continual contact with them, was insensibly drawn into meditation on questions of current philosophy, in which she became interested.

At some unknown time she began to visit the house which Nicolas Vauquelin, Sieur des Yveteaux, had built in the Rue des Marais, in the suburb of

Saint-Germain, and she continued to be a frequent visitor there until 1648. Des Yveteaux had been tutor to Louis XIII, but had been expelled from Court because of his atheism. He had grown into an eccentric old man, who steeped himself in mythology and poetry and tried to live a life of varied pleasure in an atmosphere of paganism and luxurious sensuality. He used to disguise himself sometimes as a satyr, sometimes as a shepherd, or again as a god, in bucolic surroundings amidst women similarly attired.

It was through her music that Ninon came into this company. The melodious murmur of her lute harmonising with the tones of the harp, which Jeanne Félix, Dame du Puy, the poet's mistress, played so skilfully, used to enchant the master of the house, while she on her part was fascinated with his house, filled with works of art, and the gardens planned to reproduce the Hesperides, where exquisite banquets and charming concerts were held, and the conversation mingled impiety with nonsense. Through the influence of the company she met there she began to incline gradually towards scepticism. One fast day, when Des Yveteaux had confessed to having neglected to attend Mass, Ninon gave him one of her yellow ribbons as a reward, and the old man wore it proudly in his cap. It was a childish action,

but symptomatic of the state of her soul. Her progress towards complete unbelief was rapid thereafter. Alphonse du Plessis, Cardinal de Lyon, who, as has been seen, could have helped her to preserve her Christian faith, turned her from it instead by his senile infatuation, and Ninon had no one else from whom she could seek aid.

She now began to admit into her immediate circle of doctrineless unbelievers certain insinuating persons whose interest in science inclined them towards materialism. The philosophy of the Chevalier de Méré, whose teaching undoubtedly influenced her, was based on the study of mathematics and was fed from epicurean sources, as was that of Alexandre d'Elbène. A certain Monsieur de Montmor kept an academy where learned people gathered to examine new knowledge and discuss accepted truths. Elbène was a frequenter of this academy and learnt to dispense with the discipline of life, to throw away all scruples, and to enjoy the present without taking any thought for the future. He was very wealthy, so that he could afford to scorn remunerative employment and to divide his time between the diversions of the inns on the one hand, and the bowers and drawing-rooms of high-born ladies on the other hand. He had been nicknamed "Lord Protector of the Gossips of the Marais." There is no proof that Ninon took him

for a lover, and she probably did not do so, but she certainly listened to his theories. It delighted her to be a pupil of such an erudite and eloquent master. He advised her deliberately and for a discernible purpose to cast off the bonds of convention and let her nature have free play. Thus he succeeded in throwing her into a state of doubt. His influence stopped there. He lacked the requisite subtlety to draw his pupil into the path of dalliance he was himself treading so recklessly.

It was Saint-Evremond who exercised the decisive influence on Ninon's life. She had known him as a young officer round about the year 1639, when he and his boon companions were intimate visitors at Marion de Lorme's house. She so fascinated him that he followed her to her own abode. It seems unlikely that he was ever one of her lovers. He had little physical attractiveness. His appearance was spoilt by a horrible wen placed in the middle of his broad forehead, at the base of his nose, between attractive soft eyes. His mouth was shapely, but bitterly hard and scornful, and seemed never to have known the softening influence of a simple smile. His face, however, was brimful of intelligence and he always attracted keen interest, though not love. He spoke very little, but what he said was wonderfully worth listening to, whether it were only waggishness or a deep argument on



Bibliothèque Nationale — From a print by Gerard Edelinck

Saint-Evremond

Saint-Evremond, in the course of many intimate conversations, introduced her to his system of philosophy, established his influence over her mind, brought to fruition the seed that Henri de Lanclos had sown, and weeded out the last of her superstitions. He extracted a promise from her that she would read and study the books which had influenced him, and thus he inculcated ideas in her mind which soon carried her away. Inspired by memories of her father, whom she had dearly loved, Ninon opened the breviary he had bequeathed to her and courted her fate. She became fascinated and thrilled by Montaigne's scepticism, and grasped without difficulty the theories which the sarcastic old philosopher propounded so racily. In her desire to penetrate to the very sources of the master's thought, she also dipped deeply into the works of his close friend, La Boétie, of his disciple Charron, and of his daughter by allegiance, Mademoiselle de Gournay, who had recently died in a garret in the Rue Saint Honoré. She may not yet have grasped the inner significance of Montaigne's system, which predicates scepticism as a means of attaining tolerance, and through tolerance its real objective, serenity of mind. Saint-Evremond was still at the combative stage, and willing to sacrifice his liberty to his ideals, and Ninon probably looked upon scepticism as a doctrine of active struggle rather

than as a mere remedy against fanaticism. In fact, she was barely initiated into its principles ere she found herself burning with the ardour of a propagandist and longing to demonstrate her sincerity by an open repudiation of religion. She began to make daring remarks, as for example:

"He is to be pitied who needs religion to guide him through life, because it shows that his heart is corrupt and his intelligence weak."

Such talk was enough of itself to make her an object of suspicion, but she made matters worse by open scoffing.

"On Ash Wednesday," she said, "instead of the words it is customary to use, the officiating priest should murmur as he lightly touches the penitent's forehead, 'Give up love-making, give up love-making!'"

When she lay at death's door after an illness she received the sacraments for the sake of decency, and similarly she used to take priests to the bedsides of her dying friends. Whilst a priest was preparing to administer extreme unction, she said to him: "Sir, do your duty by my friend. I assure you that for all his reasoning he knows the truth as little as you do."

Society at this time was chary of allowing such freedom of conscience even to men, and to women it was denied altogether. Ninon's sayings were

handed about and soon began to cause scandal, and people began to look upon her house as the abode of the devil.

Blot, a satirical versifier, who aired his atheism under the protective wing of Gaston d'Orléans, became an intimate of her house and helped to increase her ill-fame with religious people. No one equalled him in the quantity and audacity of his blasphemous verses and the boldness with which he cried aloud his unbelief. Ninon used to enjoy hearing him chant his scurrilous couplets to popular airs. One day during Lent, when singing was forbidden, she asked him for a song. Monsieur Claude de Chauvigny, Baron de Blot l'Eglise, did not need a second invitation, but began to improvise with gusto. To tease her, however, he proclaimed her complicity and held her up to the world's disapproval in the following words :

(8) *Puisque l'adorable Ninon*
Trouve bon qu'on chante en carême,
Je ne lui dirai jamais non
Plut à Dieu qu'elle en fit de même.

Her attitude was so deliberate and her words and defiance of public opinion so open that Ninon may have been compelled to change her abode about this time, but it is more likely that she made up her mind to leave the Marais for self-interested reasons. Her two supporters, Coulon and Aubijoux,

were no longer living on good terms together. Aubijoux, who was better looking and had more refined manners, and was, moreover, more generous than Coulon, went behind his back and begged Ninon to establish herself near him in the suburb of Saint-Germain, where there were some new houses with pleasant gardens, where she would have an abundance of light and air. Ninon acceded to his wish, and when Coulon became angry took advantage of the fact to show him the door.

It then became necessary to replace him, since the Count could not stand the whole expense of her upkeep. This time she did not feel the necessity of tolerating a lout like Coulon for the sake of monetary support, and she met Michel-Gérôme Moreau either at Scarron's or some other such house. He was a charming youngster, eighteen years of age, and was so smitten with her that he lost his appetite and followed her about everywhere; or if fate took him away from her heels for a time, he compelled her to reply to passionate love letters. He was a nephew of François Lhuillier, Gassendi's friend, who had died leaving a lurid reputation as an epicurean, and the nephew followed in his uncle's footsteps. He belonged to the group of freethinkers composed of Damien Mitton, Sebastien Potel, Jacques Bordier, Sieur de Raincy, and Picot, master of the king's music, who gathered around

Jacques Vallée, Sieur des Barreaux, and he possessed a large fortune. Ninon admired his intelligence, but physically he did not appeal to her senses at all. He treated her as deferentially as if she had been a queen, but she felt no pity for him. He soon succeeded Coulon as a subsidiser, and relieved the temporary embarrassment of her finances.

In the distant parish of Saint Sulpice liberty's reign was a precarious one. Catholics and Protestants both struggled fanatically for supremacy, and there was no room for the lukewarm in their ranks, much less for the openly sceptical. Jean-Jacques Olier, the parish priest, kept a firm hand on the Papists, and hoped, through the agency of the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement*, to purify morals by exterminating all sinners and heretics.

Unluckily as it turned out, Ninon did not fear this priest and the terrible enthusiasm which animated him, and never dreamt that he was spying upon her. She proceeded to live her life as freely on that side of the river as on the other. All her swains came around her as before, and their carriages made a great deal of noise in the quiet streets of the suburb. A neighbour, the President Tambonneau, who lived in a gaudy palace in the Rue de l'Université, came himself to pay his respects in the intervals of plotting with the last remaining

Frondeurs. The peace of the suburb was jeopardised. Thousands of curious eyes spied upon the house where scandal reigned so brazenly and which was ablaze at night with countless bright lights. They sought to penetrate the mysteries of this house of evil, and here and there picked up remarks that could be construed as disrespectful to religion; but no one dared to make any fuss. Unfortunately new indiscretions were committed, which stirred the religious party into wrath. In 1651 it was reported that Ninon's intimate friends ate meat openly at her table during Lent. Such audacity was almost unthinkable, but there was evidence which had to be believed, for a priest of Saint Sulpice, passing under the windows of the house one day, received a bone at his head. He was furious, rushed to Olier's house and told him the horrible story, exaggerating the facts and even hinting that two men had been assassinated in the accursed harlot's house. This was a piece of luck for Olier, who longed to rid his parish of such a dangerous mischief-maker. He complained to a magistrate, André de Buridan, Sieur de Malhan, who was rather a rascal, and although his office obliged him to avenge the outraged cleric, had Ninon surreptitiously warned, hoping to profit thereby later on. She was thoroughly indignant at the denunciation and sent two of her friends,

the Duc de Candale and the Marquis de Mortemar, possibly the two who had committed the imprudence, to defend her. By dint of bribery they persuaded Buridan to hush up the affair, but tongues continued to wag. Madame Cornuel, the greatest perpetrator of witticisms of the century, accused Ninon of making chasubles for the Abbé de Boisrobert out of her discarded petticoats. The religious party at Court, urged on by Olier, began to take an active part. They approached Anne of Austria and besought her to rid the world of the heretic. The queen suggested sending her to the home for *filles repenties*. "But," said Bautru, a buffoon and blasphemer, who took up the cudgels in her defence, "she is neither *fille* nor *repentie*." He did not succeed, however, in stemming the movement against her, and Anne of Austria was persuaded and bullied into sending an officer with a *lettre de câchet* ordering her to withdraw into a convent.

Far from being disconcerted, Ninon glanced at the letter, saw that no particular convent was named, and returned it to the messenger with the words: "Since the Queen is good enough to leave the choice of a convent to me, I pray you tell her that I prefer that of the Grands Cordeliers." The convent of the Grands Cordeliers was under the Order of Saint Francis of Assisi, and its monks, who

wore a grey robe with a girdle of rope, had to take a vow to live on alms in the deepest poverty. In the seventeenth century, however, they had become the most undisciplined, debauched and illiterate community of monks in France. Ninon knew what she was about in thus choosing her place of retreat. Her effrontery stunned the officer who was responsible for sending her into exile, and he obediently returned with her reply. The Queen might have been angry; but, on the contrary, she forgot her pious motives and showed herself inclined to mercy. "Fie, the rogue," she cried, laughing, "let her go where she likes." She took no further steps against the high-spirited miscreant, but Ninon was afraid that her escape was only temporary.

In order to checkmate the bigots, she got the gazetteer Loret to announce her departure for America, which to many adventurous people at that time seemed to be the land of promise.

CHAPTER VII

TRUTH to tell, Ninon had no intention of going to America. She had no ambition to make her fortune, and the enchanted islands described by travellers held fewer pleasures for her than her own house with its horizon of well-kept gardens. She felt uneasy, possibly because she had heard talk of the mysterious *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement*, composed of powerful people, with ramifications throughout the length and breadth of France, which existed for the purpose of putting down freedom of thought by any means and practised all sorts of trickery and violence in the name of the law. Perhaps she felt constrained at the continued spying of the police on behalf of the religious party, and felt the need of quiet after such an exciting episode. At any rate, although she would not acknowledge herself beaten and give up the fight, she realised that she must be more prudent. She did not close her house to visitors, but pretended that the people who met there did so for the purpose of fostering poetic art and nothing else.

Poets of all sorts took advantage of her sudden hospitality to flock there to spout their rubbish. They imagined that their turn had come and that their genius would kindle Ninon's fickle heart; but she had no intention of allowing them thus to degrade their art.

Amongst those thus deluded were Charles de Villars, Comte de Brancas, Chevreau and La Mesnardière. The two latter repelled her by their pedantry. They might dedicate their sonnets and poems to her endlessly, but she was afraid that if she accepted their love they would express their joy in Latin. Others who were not so careful to appear erudite were humbugs in other ways. Amongst these was the Abbé François Tallemant, the King's Almoner. He pretended to be concerned entirely with the safety of her soul, when he would really rather have committed her to perdition. When he was with her he took up the attitude of father confessor, but Ninon was not deceived. She knew that when he bent over to murmur words of encouragement in her ear it was not through any motive of pious duty, but the better to enjoy her close proximity. She listened patiently to the poor Tartuffe's homilies and smiled calmly at the halting declarations of love with which they usually finished.

It mattered little to her that people accused her of cruelty. One day an old flame of hers, Antoine

Rambouillet, Sieur de la Sablière, handed her an entreaty addressed to her by Hercule de Lacger, Seigneur de Massuguiez.

"Shall I never see Ninon?" he asked.

(9) "*De grâce, introduis-moi chez elle.*
Je brûle de voir cette belle!
Si c'est pour mon mal ou mon bien,
Je veux mourir si j'en sais rien," *etc.*

The lines betrayed his Gascon origin. Ninon read them, smiled and made enquiries. She was informed that the author was a large, stout, knavish fellow who had just left the arms of the Comtesse de La Suze, to whom under the name of Iris he had dedicated a volume of love sonnets. He was indiscreet and swaggering, and used to go about everywhere boasting of his conquests in his unpleasant harsh voice, with its southern accent.

Ninon decided that she could not endure such a boor, and left him to kick his heels on her doorstep. Lacger wrote that her unkindness had killed him, and that he invoked her pity from the depths of the Styx into which she had plunged him, but it was all of no use, and she heard his plaintive voice no more. What these commonplace rhymers did not realise was that she detested them when they attempted to be gallant. Her interest in poetry was really a cloak under which she was gathering around herself the more daring spirits of her time,

and, without parading the fact, continuing her propaganda as an active sceptic. How else can the simultaneous presence at her house of Saint-Pavin, Des Barreaux, Boisrobert and Chapelle be explained? Those four certainly counted among the writers of the time whose light and witty productions were most admired in the drawing-rooms, but their songs and epigrams would not of themselves have sufficed to attract Ninon's attention, nor were their physical attractions such as to give pleasure to her eyes. Saint-Pavin was nearly sixty years old, a little hunchback with warped limbs, who was in the habit of making a mock of his own sorry appearance. Des Barreaux in his old age had lost his wonderful beauty, which had been like that of a pagan god. Boisrobert was over fifty years of age, and tried in vain to look a gallant in his soutane. Chapelle was the only one who was young and could have aspired to any empire over women, but his appearance was unfortunate. A lean body, wasted by dissipation, was surmounted by the face of a farmer, and was crowned with a bush of tousled hair. These cheery fellows liked to hover around women, although they were never really attracted to them. The first three preferred sodomy and the fourth the bottle. They poured forth their lays and simulated those pangs of love which they had long ago ceased to feel. Even with Ninon they

thought it merely polite to make a show of love, and express the vain regrets for which they thought she longed; but when they complained of her unkindness to them it was merely poetic license on their part. To tell the truth, they desired nothing of her but to be allowed to contemplate her beauty, and they would have been horribly embarrassed if she had been indiscreet enough to fall in love with any of them.

Ninon was puzzled by their attitude, and used to look upon them as phenomena the mysterious malformation of which she would like to understand. She liked them because they had taken lessons in libertinage under Théophile de Viau, whilst Chapelle had studied epicureanism under Gassendi. Saint-Pavin drew his means of support from ecclesiastical benefices, and Boisrobert, who was a real canon, wearing the cross and mitre, also drew his revenues from the Church. The fact added spice to their conversation and behaviour. The cynical Saint-Pavin used to sing the delights of sodomy in neat and polished verse, whilst Boisrobert officiated more often at the theatre or in drawing-rooms than at the cathedral, upholding the cult of pleasure, making fun of the pious, and absolving worldly sinners. He everywhere gave the impression that, supposing the Kingdom of Heaven really did exist, and was peopled with monks and other pious folk, it would

be a very boring place even for folk of merely ordinary intelligence. Chapelle was less self-assertive, and contented himself at this time with setting an example by his manner of living. Later on he became Molière's ally against the religious party. He cared no more for doctrine than did Saint-Pavin and Boisrobert, and he shared their epicurean scepticism. The only real bigot of the band and the most dangerous of them all was Des Barreaux, a confirmed and notorious atheist who was usually called by some such name as The Illustrious Rake, or The Prince of Libertines. From conviction and inclination he gave himself up to a life of good cheer and the pursuit of pleasure. He lived entirely for the present without thought of the future, and scoffed at the Deity as well as at the devil. Since he maintained that mind, knowledge and reason were the sources of human sorrow, he set himself to destroy all discipline and conventions, and he endeavoured to further these ends by distributing admirably-written sonnets broadcast over the country. He travelled tirelessly throughout France preaching the cause of materialism, persuading the waverers and winning neophytes, and in Paris and throughout the country he made a practice of assembling the adherents to his pernicious philosophy in discreet out-of-way inns and catechising them. He himself was quite logical and

made his actions harmonise with his theories. It is not likely that he won Ninon completely. The greatest happiness for Des Barreaux consisted in the animal satisfaction of the senses, and Ninon always refused to shut the pleasures of the mind out of her life. Des Barreaux, finding her impossible to persuade, judged her insufficiently prepared to appreciate his teaching and began to visit her less frequently.

Ninon did not care, and filled his place with another epicurean, who was more attractive because younger and less dogmatic—the poet Charles Faucon de Ris, Seigneur de Charleval. He was a gentle and amiable Norman who was rewarded for all his love sonnets by becoming Ninon's lover for a brief space of time. Bedecked with lace and smothered in ribbons, this perfumed dandy with his affected manners was the darling of the women. They looked at his delicate complexion and melancholy air and longed to comfort him like a child. They succumbed to his charms in such numbers that he began to imagine himself invincible. He used to head his letters cheekily "At the siege of So-and-so," convinced beforehand that she, like the rest, would inevitably fall.

Ninon liked him because he was a libertine and freethinker, and she tried to convince him that she liked his conversation better when it treated of

metaphysics than when it turned on love, but he would not understand her. He pressed his suit vigorously, surprised to have to wait so long for her submission.

At length she calmly and firmly informed him: "You must await my pleasure."

Such a rebuff was unparalleled in Charleval's experience, but he thought that his hour would soon come, so he waited patiently. The hour never struck, either then or later.

Ninon began to notice that the religious party were relaxing their vigilance, and she opened the doors of her house more and more widely, and, although not neglecting her poets, began to receive again the noblemen who came to pay her their respects. The physiognomy of her drawing-room did not change, and her guests were recruited more than ever from amongst freethinkers and free-livers.

One day someone brought Louis de Mornay, Marquis de Villarceaux, to see her. It may have been Alexandre d'Elbène, whose family had long been friendly with the haughty de Mornays. Or more likely it was Boisrobert, who was a friend of the Marquis, and knew him to be a man likely to appeal to Ninon.

At any rate, Ninon's attention was immediately attracted to the new-comer. She liked the looks of Villarceaux, whose handsome face gleamed with

intelligence and pride. His figure was strong and elegant, with the graceful strength of a horseman used to the strenuous life of a keen huntsman. His conversation showed that he possessed a mind which, although not very subtle, was yet broad and free from the hampering influence of convention. Although he was an officer and a swordsman, he did not despise literature, and he belonged to a very wealthy family, whose womenkind had shown a distinct appreciation of poets.

Ninon knew nothing of his life when she first fell in love with him, except perhaps that he was married to a charming wife and had four children. Probably she never enquired into his past, and she was sure enough of her own attractions to believe that if she wanted him she would meet with no resistance.

Villarceaux did not, however, entirely deserve her admiration. He had little influence at Court, where only his fearlessness as a hunter appears to have been appreciated. He had little refinement or delicacy of feeling, and was very debauched. When he was twenty years of age his family arranged a marriage between him and Marie de Girard. He seduced her and then refused to marry her. In despair the forsaken girl married a lieutenant-general, Jacques de Castelnau, Sieur de Mauvissière. Villarceaux himself married



Louvre

From a miniature by Jean Petitot

Louis de Mornay, Marquis de Villarceaux

Denise de la Fontaine d'Esche, one of the Queen's maids of honour, and then the conscienceless wretch made up to her again. One day he awoke to the fact that Jérôme de Nouveau, his mistress's brother-in-law, was paying her far too much attention. He made no attempt to call out his rival, but contented himself with making a bargain : " Whichever of us has fewer favours from her shall give her up to the other."

He produced a couple of hundred letters, portraits, and lockets of hair, while Nouveau had to own up to nothing more than a few kisses. Villarceaux was angry with Marie all the same, and treated her like any hussy, showing all over Paris the letters she had written to him under the impression that he was an honourable man. All his life the Marquis had made fools of the women with whom he associated and who had bestowed their favours upon him. The Maréchale de la Ferté had annoyed him too, and he basely made public her letters to him. Later on he attempted to sell his niece Mademoiselle de Grancey to Louis XIV.

Ever on the look-out for new prey, he was trying to cultivate an intimacy with that poor dupe, the newly-wed Scarron, at the same time as he was beseeching the Abbé de Boisrobert to introduce him to Ninon. Circumstances arose, however, to lure

him away temporarily from the contemplation of Françoise d'Aubigné's radiant countenance. Ninon coveted him. To her his faults mattered not a jot, and he appeared to be just the sort of young and lusty youth she desired to restore the balance between her inactive body and over-active mind.

To Ninon's surprise she realised that this lover thrilled her more than any previous one, with the possible exception of Coligny. She found herself full of such strange and delicious feelings that she thought someone must have given her a love philtre. As a matter of fact she had fallen deeply in love. Longing for solitude in which to enjoy this new state of affairs, she dismissed all her other suitors, even Aubijoux and Moreau, who were acting as her bankers. Little she cared that by doing so she was reduced to poverty, and found herself homeless. She lived only for love.

Villarceaux, who had been inclined to jealousy, approved of her break with the world, but found himself in difficulties because he did not know where to house her. He himself lived mostly at his castle of Villarceaux, in the Vexin, and had a small apartment in one of the royal palaces at Paris. He might have rented a discreet house and have shut up his mistress in it; but summer had come, and he longed to take Ninon into the country somewhere where they would be quite free from

constraint. He thought for a moment of offering her shelter at Villarceaux, but his deserted wife protested vigorously against such an outrage. Not far from Villarceaux, however, there lived a great friend of his called Valliquierville, a kind and eccentric old man who lived the life of a recluse on his estate of Ruel, near Meulan, forgotten by the world. The marquis thought that he might shelter his love affair and begged his hospitality. The generous Valliquierville immediately offered him the use of his house. Ninon went, therefore, to beautiful Vexin, the land of castles and woods, meadows and streams. She soon discovered her host to be a most attractive companion. He was fifty-two years of age, but did not repent of having led an adventurous and risky life. He loved sunshine and nature, and rejoiced to find his head still on his shoulders as he browsed amongst his memories. Having been born an intriguer in the days when people knew how to organise really fine conspiracies, he had been the originator of the plot by which the Comte de Soissons and Gaston d'Orléans hoped to rid France of Richelieu. Together with the Comte de Montrésor and Saint-Ibar he had sworn to make the tyrant in the scarlet robe bite the dust outside Amiens. But the attempt was foiled, and he joined the other fugitives who were awaiting in London the minister's demise.

He returned from England in 1648 and joined the party against Mazarin, barely escaping with his life from the Fronde, in which he took an active part, aiding the Duc de Longueville in the subjugation of Normandy.

It was no appetite for gain nor mere taste for rebellion that actuated him in all these turmoils, but a keen and patriotic sense of justice. Valliquierville was a thoroughly good man. Retz praised his intelligence, moderation and strength of character, and rejoiced in his firm friendship. La Rochefoucauld scoffed at his virtue, which he thought too austere and attributed to affectation; but Ninon understood him better, and unhesitatingly opened her heart to him.

He was not, to be sure, a strictly virtuous man, but he was kind-hearted to excess and full of common sense. He insisted that Ninon and her lover should build up their strength with the good cheer he provided at his table, but he contented himself with a few vegetables and a little fruit. His pleasures were simple, and consisted of walking, meditation and conversation. It is not known in what school he learnt his philosophy, but he revelled in Montaigne and belonged to the sceptic group, for which he proselytised energetically. He continued Ninon's instruction and helped to form her system of morality. What with her lover and her

friend, Ninon was happy physically and mentally. She had expected to sacrifice metaphysics to love, and was doubly happy not to have to do so. The days, weeks and months flowed past and winter came, with the necessity of returning to Paris.

Ninon had no desire to return to the dull quarter over which Jean-Jacques Olier reigned supreme, and Villarceaux, whose passion was even stronger after months of unclouded happiness, longed to install her in some pleasant house where no one would come to molest her. Thanks to the trouble he took, Ninon was soon occupying a house in the Rue de Richelieu in the parish of Saint-Roch, not far from the garden of Thevenin, the oculist, where the wits of this wealthy neighbourhood used to gather. The Marquis was devoured with jealousy, and desired to keep Ninon continually under his own eyes. He dared not live with her entirely because of his wife, for whom he retained a remnant of respect, so he sought a means of spying upon her without offending his wife's susceptibilities.

It was the Abbé de Boisrobert who came to his rescue. Boisrobert had already built a house in the Rue de Richelieu from the windows of which Ninon's house could be overlooked, but he had had financial losses and would be glad to sell it provided that the purchaser would consent to leave him a lodging in it for his lifetime. This suited the

Marquis splendidly, and he immediately offered to take over the house, under the pretext of obliging the abbot. They settled the deal a few days later in a lawyer's office.

Villarceaux made a great deal of use of his post of observation. Whenever he was not actually holding Ninon in his arms he suffered torments and spied upon her, but he never discovered anything that looked like treachery on her part. She was loyal to the core and knew nothing of hypocrisy, but nevertheless he kept incessant watch, especially at night, when his absurd anxiety rendered him sleepless. Once towards the middle of one of his watchful nights he espied a lighted candle in her room, and immediately sent a valet round to enquire whether she were ill. Ninon replied that she was not, and he at once took it into his head that she was writing to a rival. Blinded with rage he made to put on a hat to go to her, but seized instead a silver ewer, which he jammed on his head so furiously that it could be got off only with the greatest difficulty. Ninon, in the meantime, was angry at being suspected and refused to justify herself, with the result that Villarceaux fell dangerously ill. Then it was her turn to be heartbroken. In her anxiety to restore her lover's faith in herself she ruthlessly cut off her hair and sent it to him. As he felt the perfumed

caresses of the beautiful curls against his cheeks he realised the stupidity of his suspicions. The action of sending him her hair proved conclusively that Ninon had no thought of letting anyone else come near her. Instantly he recovered his health. When Ninon heard that he was better she rushed to his room, and never left his side for a whole week.

Naturally their folly did not remain entirely secret. Madame de Villarceaux well knew the extent of her loss and took refuge at Villarceaux, where she sought to forget her unworthy husband in presiding over her children's education. Boisrobert went to visit her from time to time and brought back news of her, as well as amusing stories with which to regale his friends.

One day he found the children's tutor with the Marquise. The tutor was anxious to show off to the abbot what enlightened instruction he was giving his pupils, and he asked them before him:

"*Quis fuit primus monarcha?*"

"*Nembrot,*" replied one of the children.

"*Quem virum habuit Semiramis?*"

"*Ninum,*" replied another.

Hardly had the word with its too well-known syllables fallen from the childish lips than Madame de Villarceaux turned on the interrogator:

"Really," she said, "it is too bad of you to

teach my children such nastiness. It is an insult to me even to mention that name in my house."

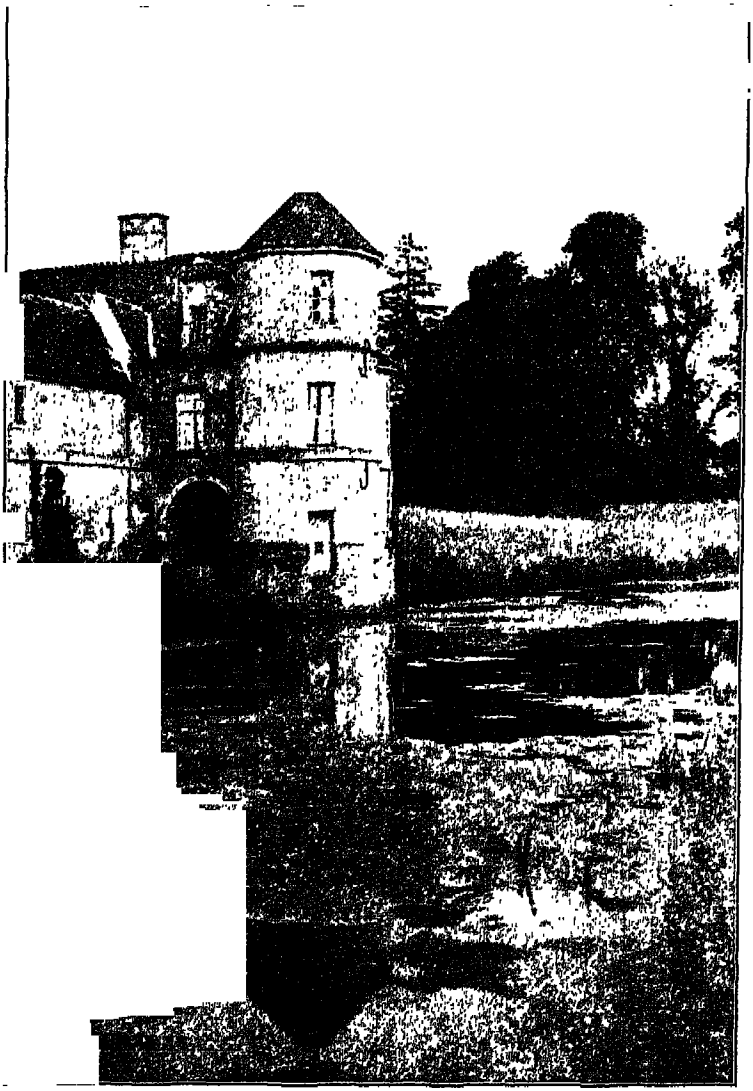
She did her best to destroy her rival's influence, but there was little she could do to combat her husband's infatuation unless she dissolved her marriage, especially as there was now a new complication which made the lovers more devoted than ever. Ninon knew that she was about to become a mother. In due time a son was born, whom they called Louis-François. Ninon welcomed him with smiles, feeling all the joy of motherhood and a maternal love which outlasted all other affections. She entrusted the fragile babe to a nurse for the time being, but later she took him herself to educate according to the principles of Montaigne. She began to look upon herself as more truly Villarceaux's wife than his real one was, since she thought herself more devoted to his happiness. The Marquis's love seemed to grow stronger and stronger, to judge, at least, from certain facts handed down to us by tradition, if not history. In the countryside around Villarceaux many curious legends grew up that have become perpetuated.

It is said that in the course of the year 1654 Valliquierville was unable, for some unknown reason, to receive Ninon and Villarceaux on his own estate of Ruel. He may have had to go on business into Normandy, where his family manor was; at any

rate, the Marquis desired to renew the intimacy of the previous year of which he retained such radiant memories, and resolved to install his mistress on his own estate. It is not known where the Marquise and her children were living at the time, but probably the poor woman had retired to some relative's house or was living in Paris. The castle of the Villarceaux family dates from the fifteenth century and stands in the depths of a valley commanded by wooded hillsides. One wing of the building, flanked by two towers, is mirrored in the waters of a small lake. From its windows one can watch the sparkling play of waters flowing through canals and basins amongst the flower-beds, whilst beyond the pond terraced gardens planted with chestnut and elm trees were laid out on a hillside which rippled with gently murmuring streams. It would appear that the Marquis was not so indelicate as to allow Ninon to occupy the conjugal bed when he took her to visit the home of his ancestors. She preferred to take up her abode in one of the towers from whose windows she could feast her eyes on the beautiful and peaceful countryside. The Tower of the Condemned had a bad name, for it was there that the lord of the manor used to shut up the unfortunate prisoners upon whom judgment had been passed. Turbulent waters rushed under the

foundations with a muffled roar. The other tower wore a more attractive air. Rings of white stone encircled it and its pointed roof gleamed in the sunshine. A discreetly-hidden door opened into an arch by which the tower was joined to the main building. Villarceaux had turned it into a retreat for himself, where he could indulge in his favourite pastime of painting. Tradition asserts that Ninon installed herself in this pleasant tower, which still bears her name. It was a tiny dwelling, but a perfect nest for lovers. A short staircase led to a tiny ante-chamber and thence to a larger room upon whose walls were painted smiling ladies in ceremonial attire, each bearing an allegorical name. A door opened into another room, arc-shaped and lighted by a window on the left. This was Ninon's "*boudoir*," according to the local historians, who forget that the art of "bouding" was not invented until the eighteenth century. It is needless to specify for what use Ninon reserved it. She must undoubtedly have admired the heavy wood decoration of the walls and ceiling, whose many arabesques framed the Marquis's coat of arms, while medallions, skilfully painted by himself amid floral motifs, represented scenes from history and mythology.

On the right wall were two movable pieces of woodwork, covered with pictures concealing rows



Ninon's Tower

In the old Château of Villarceaux

of bookshelves. Open the woodwork on the left and behind the shelves is a little door leading to a hiding-place ventilated by a loop-hole in which a person could sit or stand upright. This hiding-place must have concealed many mysteries. It is rumoured that Ninon used it to hide a person whose presence in the castle would have been resented by Villarceaux, but that is an absurd supposition. It is much more likely that Ninon kept this uncomfortable den for herself to disappear into in case the Marquise turned up unexpectedly.

Madame de Villarceaux, however, had no idea of making any fuss, and allowed the abode, in which she had once hoped to live peacefully and happily, to be desecrated.

The lovers spent their time in walking, exploring the terraces in leisurely fashion, and lingering in the freshness of the garden. There was running water everywhere, which seemed to invite bathing in its crystal depths. One day Ninon steeped her hands and face in the clear water of a little stone fountain — the Fountain of Youth — which stood among the trees, while Villarceaux told her how those who bathed in its water would preserve the delicacy and softness of their skin. Another day she was more daring and, disrobing herself, stepped into the water of the fountain like some beautiful naiad.

Ninon also visited the neighbouring estates, whose squires lived under the Marquis's domination. Her memory is preserved in the Castle of Omerville, near Villarceaux, a gay little castle built in the days of the Renaissance, ornamented with projecting turrets, and garlanded with flowers carved out of stone. The lovers spent happy days thus, and forgot Paris and the world.

Ninon, however, began to be troubled even in this charming solitude by various annoyances coming from the capital. At some previous time she had instituted a suit against Marie Feydean, widow of Pierre de Maupéou, and her brother-in-law, Charles de Maupéou, for the settlement of a sum of money. Warrants had been issued, one among others on the 3rd of August, 1654. She won the case, and her agents urged her to prosecute the defaulters without delay. Deaf to the lawyers' suggestions, she prolonged her stay in the Vexin until the beginning of September. On the 6th of September, after her return to Paris, she resolved to get rid of the lawyers, whom she did not altogether trust, so she empowered Jean Viété, a lawyer in Parliament, to treat and even to act in her name. Her love for Villarceaux seems to have been diminishing in intensity by this time. She had given way to the sensual part of her nature too long, and her brain was beginning to re-establish its

supremacy. She no longer craved for solitude, and began to gather people about her again, beginning with the Marquis's brother, Réné de Mornay de Villarceaux, Abbé de Saint-Quentin-les-Beauvais, and his intimate friends Valliquierville and Boisrobert. She began to be interested again in the dangerous conversations in which she used to delight before her love affair. Boisrobert was no philosopher, being too light-minded and frivolous to enjoy meditation, and he interspersed his conversation with flattery and flippancy. The Abbé de Villarceaux was a frivolous and debauched gamester, who could not concentrate on metaphysics. He was an eccentric man, whose chief delight was in uttering horrible blasphemies. So undisguised was his dissipation that it was commented upon freely in the public gazettes for the entertainment of the gossips. The noble Abbot of Villarceaux, they said :

(10) *Qui, s'il avait d'or plein sept seaux*
Et d'argent miente bourses pleines,
Les viderait dans trois semaines.

Later on this abbot, who was the Comtesse d'Olonne's lover, together with her and some other scatterbrains, thought it a good joke to wear the sacred robes of Capuchin monks and *Recollet* sisters at a masquerade. Ninon liked him because he was so cynical and because he was helping Boisrobert,

though perhaps they did not know it, to advance the growth of scepticism.

It was Valliquierville, however, who was her favourite companion. He was the only one of them whose calm and reasoned arguments against the principles of religion fully satisfied her mind. They often used to shut themselves up to discuss religious matters and to tear to pieces the doubtful hypotheses on which the simple-minded based their faith. They made no attempt to disguise the nature of their occupation, and when a stranger broke in on them one day and asked what they were discussing they readily acknowledged:

"We are trying to draw up the articles of our faith. To-day we have only made a beginning, but another time we hope to make more headway."

Villarceaux became impatient at seeing his mistress thus withdrawn from him. He felt that she despised him because he was not intelligent enough for her, and that she looked upon him as a doughty hero of the boudoir alone. Time and again he reproached her, and always the estrangement grew. The world, however, still thought them as closely united as ever, and spiteful tongues wagged at Ninon, saying, "She is growing old and becoming faithful." To be sure she was ageing, but her clear complexion and supple carriage gave her a youthful look in spite of her thirty-five years,

and her heart was not doomed to remain constant much longer.

Her taste for freedom returned all of a sudden when one day a courier handed her a note. Opening it, she recognised Saint-Evremond's handwriting, and read the following invocation as if it were a message from the past :

(11) *Chère Philis, qu' êtes-vous devenue ?*
Cet enchanteur qui vous à retenue
Depuis trois ans, par un charme nouveau,
Vous retient-il en quelque vieux château ?

He went on to speak of her past love affairs, and pointed out that their variety and precariousness had been their chief attraction. He also warned her against satiety.

For a long time past Saint-Evremond had been occupied with his military duties, and with sword and pen had been taking an active part in the Fronde. He had been at the war in Guyenne with the royal army, and had slipped out of Ninon's life. But she had not forgotten the friend who had exercised so much influence over her mind. As soon as he announced his presence in Paris by his satirical poems she sent for him, and they resumed their lost intimacy. Saint-Evremond followed up the warning he had given in verse by his advice, and made her see that by her absurd fit of sensualism she was going back on her principles

as an epicurean sceptic. He exhorted her to abide by them in the future, and succeeded in convincing Ninon, who was indeed ready to be convinced. She at once gave up the solitary life which had ceased to be attractive to her, and her old friends again discovered the way to her abode. Elbène had become more addicted to debauchery than ever, and rejoiced to find that his friend still kept her old pagan spirit intact after her long love-sickness. Ninon soon began to think of new adventures in gallantry. Madame de la Bazinière, who was jealous of her empire over men, scoffed at her before the Chevalier de Méré, who was her lover, and by so doing put it into the vain fellow's head to betake himself to the Rue de Richelieu.

When Ninon's circle was re-formed it contained many of its former members and some of those who had been instrumental in gaining her the hatred of the religious party. As it gradually became larger and included more and more members of the Court it again came to the notice of the brethren of the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement;* scattered throughout every quarter of Paris, they were more than ever determined to suppress the strongholds of atheism even by violent methods.

Villarceaux tried hard to combat the attack on his mistress. He lived a life of constant jealousy and felt his influence waning, and it hurt him

especially to see the hot-blooded Miossens, now become Maréchal d'Albert, reappear upon the scene. He knew this was a formidable rival, whose appetite moreover was whetted by long abstinence. Miossens had been unsuccessfully courting Mademoiselle de Guerchy, one of the Queen's maids of honour, who had been obliged to retire into a convent on account of her loose morals. After her retreat in the convent she had emerged apparently better able to defend herself against his attacks. He imagined that Ninon, who had formerly been kind to him, would not refuse him when he asked again, so he hovered around with great attentiveness and thereby speedily aroused Villarceaux's anger. Ninon had no intention of choosing either of the two. One had ceased to attract her years ago, and she had just realised the state of bondage in which the other was trying to keep her. She could not renew relations with Miossens and she longed to escape from Villarceaux's yoke, but she desired them both to remain her friends. They accepted her decision, but were vexed at it. Villarceaux went about basely boasting in public that he was quit for ever of a mistress who had insisted on making love to him in spite of himself. Ninon, however, took no notice of what he was saying, or rather, if she knew about it, pardoned him, because she knew that discarded lovers are prone to injustice.

It is impossible to discover how she spent her time in these days. Perhaps her circle alone, composed as it was entirely of libertines, was enough to arouse the indignation and terror of the bigots; at any rate, the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement* determined, in their secret councils, to wage relentless war on the impious ringleader of a dangerous cabal.

As a general rule, when the *Compagnie* wished to suppress an individual they had only to complain to conniving magistrates, who supported them without asking any questions, but they dare not act thus against Ninon. They collected evidence, exaggerated the facts, and laid them before the Maréchale de Grammont, a bigoted woman who had a great deal of influence over the mind of the Queen.

Aided by Mesdames de Vendôme and de Senecé, she managed to convince Anne of Austria that Ninon's conduct was horrifying the whole of Paris, that she was perverting the young, and insulting her Royal Majesty by parading her indecorum on the threshold of the Louvre. They succeeded so well that the Queen had no mercy this time, and determined to punish her insolence.

The ladies de Vendôme and de Senecé personally conducted Ninon to a convent, thoroughly amazed that she should be the victim of such barbarous treatment. She was taken to the convent of the

Madélonettes, whose Mother Superior was Anne-Marie Bollain.

Her persecutors believed that they had saved France from a great peril, but all they really succeeded in doing was to cause a disturbance, because Ninon's friends protested against such summary treatment and planned to attack the convent. They were seen from the neighbouring houses measuring the heights of the walls, and a picket had to be sent to prevent them and to protect the convent. The Queen was worried because she feared that the watch would not be able to withstand an attack in numbers and would disobey her orders, so she decided to send Ninon away. She was therefore withdrawn from the Madélonettes and taken under strong escort to the Benedictine convent at Lagny.

There she enjoyed a greater measure of liberty, and the rules allowed inmates to receive visitors. Her presence very soon made the fortune of the innkeeper of the *Epée Royale*, because all her court flocked to the little town. Boisrobert was one of the first to arrive to console his divinity. He took with him a young lackey, of the peculiar nature of whose services there is little doubt. The maid-servant of the inn, no whit abashed, asked the traveller who succeeded him in the occupation of the room:

"Will the gentleman require only one bed for himself and his lackey, like Monsieur l'Abbé de Boisrobert?"

Even Ninon, immured in the depths of her convent, heard of her friend's peccadilloes.

"I can at least do without a lackey," she told him.

"You don't understand," he replied, "it is the uniform that entices me."

But in spite of many attractions Ninon suffered from boredom. Even Villarceaux's visits did not cheer her up. It was at Lagny, however, that she received the greatest honour of her life. One day, whilst she was meditating on the uncertainty of human happiness, she heard a great commotion outside. The door of her little cell opened and a strange apparition appeared, clad half as a man and half as a woman with a scarlet jacket and a grey woollen skirt. On its head it wore a black plumed hat which hid a masculine wig.

Ninon was stricken with astonishment, and was quite bewildered, but she managed to achieve a curtsey to this quaint personage who came forward, smiling at her as she introduced herself as Queen Christina of Sweden. The northern amazon was on her way to Italy when she heard from the Maréchal d'Albert about Ninon's detention. She knew about her and admired her, as she made

a point of knowing about every person in Europe who was distinguished for superiority of intellect. She brought Ninon presents and sympathy. They chatted familiarly, and the captive explained without bitterness how she had fallen into her present disgrace. Ninon drew a vivid picture of her enemies, the religious party, for the Queen, and explained their outlook on the world, concluding with the remark:

"They are Love's Jansenists."

Christina was amused, and she realised that people had not deceived her when they praised Ninon's intelligence. She may have conceived the same sort of liking for her that she had previously had for the Comtesse de Sparre. At any rate, she suggested that Ninon should go with her to Rome. Ninon declined the honour. She loved Paris and her independence too well, and the idea of becoming the plaything of a sovereign, however eminent, did not appeal to her at all. Thus their interview ended.

"Ninon was the only one of all the women she met in France to whom Christina showed any mark of esteem," Madame de Motteville wrote bitterly.

Christina, moreover, did not content herself with expressing her esteem. When she returned from Lagny she requested Louis XIV to liberate

the prisoner, and suggested that he should keep her near him to provide entertainment for his royal person. The King had no intention of sampling such entertainment, but he listened to the other part of the Swedish Queen's advice. To the consternation of the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement*, who thought him sinfully weak, he released the prisoner.

CHAPTER VIII

NINON made haste to leave the Rue de Richelieu and return to the Marais when she regained her liberty. She had no desire to offend again the modesty of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, and she wished to escape from the surveillance of the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement.* In the Marais she knew that no one would make a fuss if a couple were surprised in an amorous attitude, and no one would attempt to prevent liberty of thought. So she established herself in the Rue des Tournelles[1] in a house which, if tradition is to be believed, was built by Jules Hardouin Mansart, the famous architect, and was leased by him to Ninon for life. Blondel has left us a plan of the transverse section and a description of this magnificent house, which was decorated by Le Brun and Mignard. Tradition in this case is at fault,

[1] Colombey, whose biography is full of inaccuracies, asserts that she went to this house in 1667. But she was there long before that date. In 1657 Scarron went to see her daily, if his letters are to be believed, at the Rue des Tournelles, and arranged to meet friends there. Somaize, whose *Dictionnaire des Précieuses* appeared in 1660, also places Ninon's residence "near the place Dorique (Royale)."

however. Jules Hardouin Mansart built a house for his own use at a much later date, and never attempted to lease it. The house which Ninon inhabited was a much more modest dwelling.[1] Her financial situation, after three years of disinterested love and the persecution of the religious party, was impoverished, and she was actually in want at this time. Happily she was surrounded by watchful friends, and Charles de Valliquierville in particular did not forget her. The old sceptic, who was living as a hermit on his estate at Ruel, did not venture to offer her pecuniary aid, for which, moreover, she did not ask, but he showed his affection for her by a more delicate gift.

He had recently lent Villarceaux in a moment of necessity a sum of four thousand eight hundred *livres*, representing an income of two hundred and sixty *livres*, thirteen *sols* and four *deniers*. Coming across the script in a drawer he bethought himself sadly of little Louis-François, Ninon's son by the Marquis. What would be the future of this delicate child, who was at present in the charge of a nurse? He had been given a guardian in the person of Jean de Bellanguerville, but this guardian was a

[1] At the time when Ninon settled in the Rue des Tournelles Mansart, who was born in 1646, was eleven years old and naturally had not begun to build houses.

nominal one only, and possessed, moreover, no fortune; and Villarceaux was probably taking no heed of his son's precarious existence.

Valliquierville thought of his own future as a confirmed celibate with no hope of ever founding a family. He knew that his fortune would pass to relations who did not care for him, so why should he not do some good before he died? His sympathy for Ninon gave him the idea of doing something for Louis-François, and he decided to give the unfortunate child the income which came from his father, in order to secure him the means of entering upon an honourable career.

Through the agency of Paul Jolly, Sieur de La Gamacherie, whom Valliquierville appointed to act for him, a contract was drawn up before lawyers. Various stipulations were made, and one of them showed that cynicism was not yet quite dead in him. It provided that if the legatee died before the donor the income would return, half to the donor's heirs and half to Mademoiselle Anne de Lanclos, if she were alive and had not become a nun or a novice. Valliquierville knew that the ladies of this world who have been the most inclined to materialism often take to religion in their old age, and he refused to enrich a convent where Ninon might be finding peace in repentance.

Ninon accepted her friend's gift with gratitude,

but she smiled at the idea of his picturing her with veiled face in the garb of a nun. She did not see herself thus attired at any time in the future. On her return from exile she had recovered her throng of worshippers. Saint-Evremond was one of the first to rush to welcome her, and so was Charleval, pallid with dissipation. Ninon was still interested in these sceptics, but she no longer required lessons from them, because she had acted upon her principles and had suffered as a result, while they always took good care not to have to endure any evil consequences. Charleval, moreover, was spending a great deal of his time on his estate in Normandy, whilst Saint-Evremond was shut up in the Bastille for having crossed swords with the Marquis du Vigean.[1] So Ninon saw little of those two, but other boon companions who held the same views took their places in her circle, amongst whom was the Comte de Vivonne. She paid little

[1] Des Maizeaux and Charles Giraud, Saint-Evremond's biographers, give the date of his imprisonment as 1652, but they have no good reason for doing so. The date 1658 is fixed by a letter from Bartet to Mazarin (June, 1658), which is preserved in the *Archives du Ministres des Affaires Etrangères de France*, t. 905, fo. 211. "I was greatly surprised at the imprisonment of Monsieur de Saint-Evremond. Many ladies and gentlemen are approaching Monsieur l'Abbé Foucquet to try to convince your Eminence of his innocence. From a long interview I had with him yesterday, I am sure that he himself is convinced of it."

attention to these admirers, her whole attention being occupied with the Scarron household, which was established in the same part of the Marais.

The poet Scarron had never lost sight of Ninon for a moment since the far-away days when he first met her at Marion de Lorme's house. Their friendship had grown stronger and never a cloud of dissension dimmed it. In 1652 Scarron married the young Françoise d'Aubigné, partly out of affection and partly out of pity. Soon afterwards he installed himself in the Rue Neuve Saint Louis in the famous house which he used to call the *Hôtel de l'Impécuniosité*. This house became the meeting ground of a loose-living crowd of wits and ladies. Ninon had been accepted quite naturally as a member of this frivolous society and gradually she became the intimate friend, if not the confidante, of Madame Scarron.

The truth of the saying that extremes attract each other is exemplified by a comparison of these two women. Physically there was little to choose between them. Both possessed a warm and vivid beauty and both seemed made for love. But appearances are deceptive, and no woman was ever more cold-blooded, calculating and narrow-minded than Madame Scarron. The marvel is that, being so different from Ninon in character and secretly loathing her mode of life, she yet came to have an

affection for her. The secret is to be found in Ninon's conversation. They came to a mutual appreciation through the magic of words, and doubtless Madame Scarron realised Ninon's noble nature and how greatly her virtues prevailed over her faults.

The study of the relations between the two women is rendered difficult, if not impossible, by Madame Scarron's faculty for dissimulation. Very little indeed has been discovered about her youth, and she never showed any but a virtuous face to the world. She never loved her crippled husband, and later on, when she reached the apogee of her fame, she hated his very memory, but whether she was unfaithful to him is still a matter of debate. For centuries people have argued on this trifling point, and defenders of her honour have even gone so far as to falsify texts in order to prove their case, but the whole question of whether there was any betrayal or not is of little historic importance. But, impartially, the case may be stated thus. Madame de Scarron's intimacy with Ninon is not denied, but did she or did she not take her lover Villarceaux from her? Almost certainly not. Villarceaux undoubtedly knew Madame Scarron in 1652, as is shown by a letter of the poet's, but there is no evidence that he visited her during his affair with Ninon who, when she dismissed him as a lover in 1655, still felt affectionate friendship for

him. They both regained their liberty and went their separate ways. Ninon spent the year 1656 doing penance at the convent of the Madélonettes, and at Lagny, and nothing is known of the Marquis's pursuits during this time. Towards the middle of 1657, or perhaps the beginning of 1658, Scarron wrote a very gushing letter to Villarceaux, thanking him for having presented him with a painting which represented two angels. At this time Madame Scarron had broken through her shy reserve and was going everywhere, and everywhere was attracting great admiration. Villarceaux, therefore, must have been on quite intimate terms with the poet. He pressed his attentions on Madame Scarron and received nothing but disdain. There was nothing in this for Ninon to take exception to, since there was no jealousy in her nature. Madame Scarron, to sum up, would have none of Villarceaux, who had been, moreover, irrevocably discarded by Ninon, so she cannot be said to have purloined Ninon's lover.

What was to be the outcome of the affair? Villarceaux was miserable, or perhaps merely pretended to be so. Boisrobert writes of him as being in love at the same time both with Madame Scarron and with an equally hard-hearted blonde syren. Suddenly he deserted the fair-haired lady in order to give all his attention to the darker one. Madame

Scarron resisted him, and out of spite he perpetrated one of those pieces of indelicacy of which there are frequent examples during his life; he painted an imaginary portrait of Madame Scarron emerging from the bath. He gloated over this picture and undoubtedly let it be understood that she had posed as his model. This behaviour did nothing to advance his suit. According to her first biographer, Madame Scarron complained bitterly, wept and sent the insolent fellow away. But that is not the truth. Their relations were never interrupted at all. Ninon, in answer to the pleas of both Madame Scarron and Villarceaux, generously took a hand in this affair of gallantry, which seems to have amused her.

What conclusions are to be drawn from all this? In spite of the denials which are put forward without the support of reliable evidence by her posthumous biographers, the arguments in favour of Madame Scarron's infidelity are disturbing, to say the least of it. Scarron seems at first to have been quite easy in his mind about the matter, and even to have treated the whole affair as a joke, but suddenly his attitude changed. In a pathetic poem and in a letter to Ninon he complained of the betrayal of a woman, and wrote in a mood of desperation even to the point of longing for death.[1] Tallemant wrote:

[1] See *Scarron et son Milieu*, by Emile Magne, p. 272, 1924.



Château de Villarceaux — From a painting attributed to the Marquis de Villarceaux

"I forgot that she (Madame Scarron) was with Ninon and Villarceaux in the Vexin this spring within a league of the house of Madame Villarceaux, wife of their gallant. It looks as if she had gone there on purpose to flout her." Saint-Simon bears out Tallemant's story, and asserts that the Marquis had "an affair for a long time with Madame Scarron," lodging her "almost all summer at Villarceaux," and that, "annoyed by his wife's mute reproaches, he asked his cousin Montchevreuil to receive his companion and himself in his house." The chronicler adds that the request was eagerly acceded to, and they spent a number of summers thus at Montchevreuil.[1] Primi Visconti is more explicit than Saint-Simon, but not so reliable; and he does not help to throw much light on the subject. "It is whispered," he says, "that when she (Madame de Maintenon) was young, she was seen in bed with the Seigneur de Villarceaux, but one of my best friends, the Marquis de Marsilly, who had been one of Madame Scarron's admirers, assures me that she was a virtuous woman, and that she refused thirty thousand crowns offered her by the superintendent de Lorme, although she was poor."

Madame de Caylus, who cannot be suspected of animosity, concedes that Villarceaux's amorous

[1] Later on, when she had become Madame de Maintenon, Madame Scarron showered favours on the Montchevreuil family.

attentions gave rise to much talk, and, in order to prove Madame Scarron's innocence, and to prove what friendly feelings Madame Scarron entertained for the Marquis, she quotes the famous letter in which Madame Scarron describes the King's entry into Paris. But this letter proves nothing at all but that the writer felt the greatest admiration for the Marquis's dark, handsome head.

In the absence of any authoritative document, this mysterious affair, in which Ninon played a disinterested part, cannot be cleared up. Are we to believe with La Fare that the intimacy between the two women was so great that "for whole months at a time they shared the same bed"? Must the authenticity be denied of the letter which Ninon wrote to Saint-Evremond towards the end of her life, when he was trying to clear up this point in the history of gallantry?

"Scarron was my friend," she said. "His wife gave me infinite pleasure by her conversation, and in the end I decided she was not subtle enough for love. As to details, I know nothing, I saw nothing, but I often lent my yellow room to her and Villarceaux."[1] Enough has been said. It must be

[1] The affair between the Marquis and Madame Scarron was interrupted at the beginning of 1660, when Villarceaux was sent to the Bastille. Later on Madame de Maintenon protected the Villarceaux family. According to Dangeau, the Marquis died on 21st February, 1691, and was buried at Chaussy.

amply evident that whatever may have been the relations between Madame Scarron and Villarceaux, Ninon no longer looked upon him as a lover. The counsels of Saint-Evremond had borne fruit.

Ninon had begun to make variety her law again, as is proved by the memorable adventure of Louis, Comte de Nançay, called the Marquis de La Chastre. He was a cavalry quartermaster who was leaving for the war, and he ardently desired Ninon, who was then his mistress, to remain true to him until his return. He wrung a promise from her, but not trusting to lightly spoken words, begged her to give him a written engagement. Ninon meekly granted the warrior's wish. Thereafter the vain fellow took every opportunity of showing off the bit of paper. Alas! Ninon did not like people to doubt her loyalty. She thought of La Chastre's piece of paper again only at the very moment when she was busy breaking her engagement.

"*Ah,*" she cried, "*le bon billet qu'a La Chastre!*"

Contemporaries were amused at her sarcastic exclamation, and it has come down to posterity as a proverb. Ninon attached no more importance, either, to papers which her lovers signed for her. According to Le Sage, who depicts her in the character of the German widow in the *Diable Boiteux,* she used to roll their promises of marriage into pellets.

She began now to feel her youth slipping from her little by little. There was still no sign of wrinkles, but she feared their advent and used to deplore the fact that the Creator had not situated them under the feet instead of on the face. For this reason she was anxious to make the most of her time before she reached the forties.

She thought no more of the fanatics who had accused her of perverting the young, and opened a sort of school for gallantry. According to Chavagnac, "When any rake had a son to be broken in" he used to send him to her school. The education which she gave them was so effectual that the young men she had trained could be readily distinguished. She used to teach them to make love prettily and delicately, and if her pupil were of a docile nature she would in a short time turn him into a thoroughly good fellow. Her teaching showed a very subtle knowledge of feminine psychology, and her morality was based on loyalty.

To a youth who confided to her the secret of a budding love affair she said: "Only by showing your respect by assiduous attentions, infinite kindness and unswerving deference can you hope to share the great love that your sweetheart has for her own beauty. Talk to her ceaselessly about herself and seldom about yourself. You may take it for granted that she is a hundred times more

interested in the charms of her own face than in the whole array of your feelings. If, however, the day comes when she gives in to your pleadings, remember when you receive her heart that she is placing her life's happiness in your hands and is making you supreme arbiter of her destiny."

Ninon's friends teased her for delivering this homily, and Saint-Pavin sang to her the following verses set to the air of *La Violette:*

(12) *Tous les blondins vont chez moi à l'école,*
Pour faire leur salut,
Je veux sauver Duras, Dangeau, Briole
Et c'est là mon seul but.
Honi soi qui mal y pense,
Je suis penitente, moi,
Je suis penitente.

It was the ambition of all society ladies to give lessons in love, and they lamented that Ninon had purloined all the youths.

Ninon cared neither for the plaints of the deserted ladies nor for the japes of the satirists. The most exclusive and brilliant young men of the day boasted of being her pupils and admirers. Armand de Grammont, Comte de Guiche, who later fell in love with Madame, Henrietta of England, Duchesse d'Orléans, and whom Madame de La Fayette described as "the most handsome and well-made young man at Court, gallant, dashing and brave, as well as full of pride and dignity," was as meek

in her company as that frolicsome jester Philippe de Courcillon, Marquis de Dangeau, whose moral aspect was thus depicted by a pamphleteer:

(13) *Être des plaisirs de son roi,*
Du jeu, du bal et de la chasse,
Faire exercise en bel arroi,
Monter quelquefois sur Parnasse.
Avoir beaucoup d'ambition,
Cajoler la blonde et la brune,
N'avoir point de réligion
Quand il s'agit de sa fortune.
Se voir le chef d'un regiment,
Achêter un gouvernement,
Être cordon bleu d' espérance,
Dangeau, par des hasards si grands,
Si la paix dure encore diz ans,
Tu seras marêchal de France.

Ninon probably added actions to words when she was instructing her cherubim, and at the same time an older, if less attractive-looking man, Jean Hurault, Sieur de Gourville, was providing her with the stronger fare for which she craved at times and which mere youngsters were unable to supply. The life of this strange rake was one long adventure in which probity and licentiousness went hand in hand. Divesting himself of the livery of a menial in the family of the La Rochefoucaulds, Gourville, who was very intelligent and skilful in almost everything, became the steward, friend and saviour of his impoverished masters. He played a very important part in the *Fronde*, and attracted the

attention of Mazarin, who was astonished to find a diplomat who was even cleverer than himself in the art of bamboozling his audience. He had a marvellous genius for finance and became wealthy through some lucky transactions. Involved in Foucquet's peculations, he spent a long time in exile, but later was pardoned and returned triumphantly to France, where he was entrusted with important missions. He became a sort of business manager for the Condés, secretly married La Rochefoucauld's daughter, and, cutting the figure of a great lord, finished up by acquiring a large fortune. As a general rule, he was overwhelmed with business and did not pay much attention to women, nor did he ever boast of his conquests. When Mademoiselle des Jardins, otherwise called Mademoiselle de Villedieu, wanted to let her affair with him leak out, she had to reveal it herself.

Ninon had been of great service to him[1] and enjoyed his firm and lasting friendship, but their actual love affair lasted only a short time. She was still seriously embarrassed financially and urgently needed to find another supporter, and she

[1] When Foucquet's trial in 1662 brought his own thefts to light, Gourville was forced to flee in haste and sought a safe hiding-place for his wealth. He entrusted 60,000 livres to the *Grand Penitencier de Notre Dame*, and a like amount to Ninon. When he returned from exile in 1668 the penitentionary denied that he had received anything, but Ninon handed over the amount intact.

soon found one in the person of Léon Fourreau, a financier, and a great ludicrous fellow whose talents were chiefly gastronomical. According to Tallemant she treated this lout like a horse, and, discovering one day that he had an abscess on his leg, diagnosed a "quittor." Then she shut the doors of her alcove to him and, despite his pleading, would not let him in again. She knew how wealthy he was and that his riches had been acquired in doubtful ways, and she made him pay accordingly. He became her banker, and she drew bills of exchange on him. In this way she put her affairs on their feet again and, being free from anxiety, was able to continue her rôle of initiatrice and take part in various social activities. She was an accepted member of the flourishing *précieuse* society of the time, for reasons which will soon be apparent; but although she may have appreciated Madeleine de Scudéry's goodness of heart, she most emphatically had nothing to do with the puerilities of the *Carte de Tendre*. She much preferred the circles in which the so-called "heroines" amused themselves by discussing *Jouissance* and the *Carte d'Amour* with capital letters. The Comtesse de La Suze and Madame Cornuel[1] were

[1] Madame Cornuel was famous for her wit and witticisms. When she died in 1694 a poet wrote her epitaph and finished with the words:

(14) *Comprehendre quel fut son mérite,*
Elle eut l'estime de Lanclos.

among her most intimate friends. Influenced by them, she adopted poses and amused herself with trials of wit.

When the question of emblems and devices was agitating their circle, for example, she chose her own after ripe consideration. Her seal of red wax on the envelope which contained her will bore them: A crown crossed by a flower, with the device *Jusques au bout*, setting forth her whole programme of proud and intelligent energy.

From time to time Ninon, without being vain about her productions or signing them, took to writing prose and verse. Possibly the Comtesse de La Suze and the Marquis de Montplaisir, who used secretly to retouch their rhymes and phrases, persuaded her to do so. There is little trace left of Ninon's poetry, which was almost entirely in the form of epigrams. To François de Beauvilliers, Comte de Saint-Aignan, who was in the habit of raving about the magnificence of the artificial gardens at Versailles, Ninon wrote thus:

(15) *Damon, laisse juger nos yeux*
De ces jardins délicieux.
Ou l'art surpasse la nature.
Le froid qui regne dans tes vers
Fait plus de tort à la verdure
Que le plus affreux des hivers.

When Mademoiselle de Montpensier and her mob of imitators started the fashion for pen

portraits, Ninon wrote the *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, a quaint fantasy which reflects the influence of Montaigne. She never wrote to acquire fame, but only with a definite end in view, such as replying to some fool or spreading abroad her ideas. The most important and influential of her short works was suggested to her by a singular adventure in 1659.

Although she had no longer any need of masters, since she had assimilated and practised the doctrines of epicurean scepticism, she nevertheless sought the company of philosophers, and one day Louis de Lesclache was introduced to her. He was from Auvergne, and was one of the few who still preached the Aristotelian philosophy in France. There was nothing about him at the first glance to indicate that he was a fanatic. He was not a doctor of the Sorbonne and he wore no robe, but dressed in simple fashion in a cloak and doublet embellished neither with lace nor ribbons. His silk stockings were well pulled up. There was no plume in his hat, but his well-cared-for hands were encased in fine gloves from Grenoble. He had no affectation. With him a droop of the eyelids, a smile or some such slight gesture took the place of the usual grimaces indulged in by the young rakes. Ninon liked him at first sight. She knew nothing about him except that he was always much

run after at receptions and that numerous pupils attended his lectures. She knew also that he lived in the Rue Nôtre Dame, where an old *précieuse*, Madame Maréchal, revered him as a sort of god. They began to chat, and Lesclache immediately began to rant against Balzac and Voiture, decried the taste of the moderns in letters, plays and romances, and vituperated the frivolous people who were, he said, abandoning things of solid worth in order to flirt with mere words.

This diatribe astonished Ninon. Lesclache went on to speak of his admiration for science in general, and for his own particular branch of it, and finished with an offer to instruct her.

"You will learn more from me in one month," he said, "than all these dabblers will teach you in a lifetime."

Ninon thought he might prove amusing, so she agreed to work under his tutelage. Lesclache went to fetch his books. They were magnificent volumes in quarto in which he had reduced Aristotle's philosophy into synoptic tables, from which the budding philosopher could extract much information at a glance.[1]

Ninon was amused, and made a few enquiries

[1] These tables were accompanied by compact volumes of explanations which were sold with them, and which are now very rare.

about him. She discovered that in his youth he had been a member of that burlesque of an academy which the Vicomtesse d'Auchy was running in the parish of Saint-Eustache. Many people laughed at him and thought him mad or at least silly. Furetière considered him a trash-monger. Ninon enquired further and discovered that at the house of the pious Duchesse d'Aiguillon, on the very day that Blaise Pascal explained the principle and working of his counting machine, Lesclache demonstrated, by the aid of his tables and perfectly "ravishing" arguments, the immortality of the soul. His metaphysics and ethics seemed to be directed towards some particular end, and he catechised ceaselessly. Even at carnival time he went about amongst the crowds lecturing on "Our Father" and the Beatitudes, but he was most successful in the drawing-rooms of prudes and religious people. Ninon asked herself anxiously what he was looking for in the abode of a courtesan. She was frightened and decided to destroy any desire he might have to return to her house. She pretended to be carefully studying his dry tables and thus gave him a sense of security. He made use of it to attempt to gain control of her will, so she arranged a rude awakening for him.

One afternoon, when Louis de Lesclache was due to come and see her, she collected a few choice

spirits around her. When the philosopher made his appearance they were busy discussing the question of whether love is a passion or a virtue. Suddenly they all turned upon him and asked his opinion. He immediately brought out his tables and pointed to his definition of love.

"Love is a very strong inclination of the senses."

Ninon kept quiet out of politeness, but her visitors let themselves go.

"What," cried one of them, "is that all you have to say about the passions, about those impelling forces which so agitate our lives? You have assuredly shut up a mighty ocean in a very small space! What a master of condensation you are! Only one line about love! That is treating the goddess very shabbily!"

"There is nothing so beautiful and bounteous as love," said another, "and this book makes it as dry as a skeleton without flesh or colour."

"Do you want to know what I think of your philosophy?" said another. "I liken it to a very poor and lean queen whose tables are badly served."

The philosopher was not discomfited by these attacks. He grew excited and the debate became impassioned. Ninon took up her lute and played a few chords, and even played a courant which her visitors danced in a ring.

As they took their seats again one of them mischievously asked whether there was a table of dancing in Monsieur le Lesclache's work. When Ninon replied in the negative, he turned to the philosopher :

" Sir, you must make one for love of me."

Lesclache, without realising the sarcasm of the remark, began to explain how he would set about such a table and added : " When my table is finished, anyone who reads it will become a clever dancer ! "

Immediately the whole room burst out laughing. Then Lesclache realised that they were making fun of him. He was furious and left the house at once. Ninon apologised in vain. He would not come back. "I can see," he said, "that I shall never be able to influence you again." [1]

He said he would send her one of his old scholars who was used to his methods and would be able to take his place. Ninon had no desire to meet the pupil of such a master, but she had nevertheless to resign herself to doing so, because the pupil soon presented himself. His name was Félix de Juvenel, Seigneur de Carlineas. He was

[1] Louis de Lesclache became rich through his pupils and the sale of his books. He married Bernarde Giraud, who brought him a dowry of 12,000 livres and 3,000 livres of jewellery. She succeeded in ruining him, and he retired to Grenoble and thence to Lyons, where he died in 1671.

a Languedocian who had come from Pézenas to live in Paris. He belonged to a very ancient noble family, and in his youth he was a frequent visitor to the Hôtel de Rambouillet and collaborated in the *Guirlande de Julie*. At this time he was past forty, married, and the father of five children, besides being the author of a very bad romance. He poured forth verses and had announced the approaching publication of historical studies, whilst he was endeavouring by intrigue to gain the fame which his books had not won for him.

Unfortunately he could not entirely conceal his autocratic temper under the mild manner he was trying to assume. At the first glance Ninon saw what a hypocrite he was, and discerning his false pride and affectation held him up to the ridicule of her friends. They beheld his attempts to play the gallant, his sighing and singing of love songs with amazement, and tried to endure his impertinent criticism and his jealousy. The women amongst them were even more stupefied to hear him passing judgment on their characters and their intellects, appraising their attractions and attributing virtues and good qualities to them at his own sweet will.

The presence of such a buffoon could not long be tolerated in such a company of cultured and intelligent people. Unknown to Ninon, a conspiracy

was formed to get rid of him. One day when he came to visit Ninon he found her surrounded by a large gathering of people, who overwhelmed him with compliments as soon as he opened his mouth, and begged him to make a speech. Like his master Lesclache, he chose for subject the eight beatitudes. Again compliments were rained upon him. He was quite carried away by his triumph and thought he would profit by it. Dragging a lady upon whom he had fixed his attentions into a quiet corner, he bent down as if to whisper in her ear and deliberately kissed her. A resounding smack punished him for his audacity, and also gave the conspirators their opportunity. They all threw themselves upon the indiscreet fellow, and one of them hit him on the nose saying:

"Take that, you lovesick philosopher." Another stuck pins into him with, "Take that, you lovesick musician." Another boxed his ears with, "And that, you lovesick poet."

Ninon tried to rescue him, but could not prevent his receiving the punishment he had deserved. All that she could do was to get him out of their clutches and help him to make his escape. As he reached the door, bruised and furious, he shouted, "You rascals, I will have my revenge."

Ninon had all her life welcomed learned people at her house. Why, therefore, did she countenance

such barbarous treatment and drive both Lesclache and Juvenel away from her house? It was because she, even before Molière, was fighting Tartuffe, who was trying to insinuate himself into her intimacy. She recognised the hypocrite and immediately unmasked him. She may even have suspected them of being agents of the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement*, which was known to slip its spies into the midst of groups of libertines.

Lesclache and Juvenel answer exactly to the description of such spies. They were militant members of the religious party, and in society went about preaching on pious subjects, usually borrowing the drawing-room of some supporter of the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement* for the purpose of delivering their homilies. They professed to be spreading the doctrines of Aristotle, who was approved of by the Faculty of Theology. Lesclache verbally, and Juvenel in his writings, consistently decried poets, romantics and authors of tragedies and comedies, who by glorifying gallantry turned people away from the austere life; but, far from suiting their actions to their words and setting an example of the humility they preached by their virtues, they ran after women and under pretext of instructing them tried to seduce them.

When Félix de Juvenel returned to Pézenas he set about the revenge he had promised, and

published the *Portrait de la Coquette*. Ninon was left in no doubt as to the character of her enemy. With great cunning he refrained from directing his criticism against any particular person or episode, and he did not attack her personally, but he held up to public ridicule the whole gamut of doctrines upon which the *précieuse galantes* founded their morality. His pen stated the religious party's case against the spirit of emancipation born of scepticism. Open war succeeded to the underhand intrigues which had been fostered in the drawing-rooms.

Ninon could not ignore the danger of such an attack, because she, together with several other women, was the leader of the *précieuses galantes* who had formed a cabal of women eager for independence. Her early example had borne fruit. She had always claimed equality of rights and duties for the two sexes, and had lived as a man in order to be free from bondage. Now she had supporters and followers who, having grown tired of irksome constraint engendered by a society which had become over conventional and disciplined, were carrying their emancipation to extremes and were trying to institute a new social code. The sources of their subjection had been religion and filial duty, so they now endeavoured to cast them off. They demanded the free disposal of

their hearts, and refused to accept marriages of convenience, which were the rule in most households, but preferred to follow the dictates of their own hearts, even if it meant celibacy. They demanded the institution of divorce, and rebelled against the family law, which could force them into convents whether or not they had any vocation, and against compulsory maternity which overwhelmed them with children, preferring maternity to be voluntary. Finally, they desired equal rights in their settlements and equal authority in their households. The whole conversation of the *précieuses galantes* revolved round these topics, and they gained ever more recruits through their propaganda. Poets and philosophers were won over to their cause, and poured forth their views in writings with a view to bringing about a change of public opinion.

Félix de Juvenel, mouthpiece of the religious party, set himself deliberately to check any such revolution of public opinion. He began by stigmatising the *précieuses galantes* as pernicious corrupters of the public morals and heretics who set themselves against the old familiar laws, thus undermining the sacred institution of marriage. He pointed out that they were rebels to the supremacy of men in general and husbands in particular.

Ninon saw that it would not do to let this

tirade pass without reply, since it placed the cause of the *précieuses galantes* in such an invidious position. So she took up her pen. She made no attempt to refute the pamphleteer's arguments, deeming that that would be very tactless, and she desired above everything to be prudent. It seemed to her, therefore, that the best weapon to fight with was satire. In the *Coquette Vengée*, therefore, she contented herself with drawing the portraits of Juvenel and Lesclache, making them so lifelike that it was quite evident they were founded on reality. She then proceeded to relate in a quiet and dignified manner how they had behaved in her house.

The two men immediately found the doors of all the worldly houses closed to them. Ninon, however, did not feel quite easy in her mind yet, and it was fortunate for her that Molière at this juncture produced *Les Précieuses Ridicules* on the stage of the Petit-Bourbon. It was a strange coincidence. Whether or not Molière and Ninon were already acquainted and had premeditated a concerted action is not known; but certainly Molière's piece was a decisive help to Ninon's cause. It is generally said that he was satirising the false *précieuses*, and several lines of obscure meaning in his preface appear to bear out this assertion. But none of his contemporaries, as far as is known, divided the

précieuses into false and true. They all agree, however, in pointing out that the nonsense-mongers satirised by the comedian were the prudish *précieuses* who belonged to the religious party.

It must be concluded, therefore, that Molière meant the prudes by the false *précieuses* and the *précieuses galantes* by the true *précieuses*.

When first he arrived in Paris he allied himself with Ninon's party by his outspoken criticism of the religious party. That party, moreover, realised at once that a formidable enemy had arisen, and that if they were to save themselves they must crush him without delay. Through the agency of an influential personage, therefore, they obtained the withdrawal of the comedy. Now such a stringent measure would appear excessive if it were simply a question of a satire on ridiculous ways of speaking, and it seems more reasonable to accept it as a protective measure adopted on behalf of a group of individuals who were powerful at Court.

Ninon, it appears, took a passionate interest in the whole business, and was overjoyed when she heard that Molière had succeeded in getting the interdict on his play raised. The supporters of the religious party were not yet disarmed and in retreat before an enemy more powerful than themselves. They were, on the contrary, busy preparing a new attack. Attached to their ranks by bonds

of self-interest was an insignificant writer called Baudeau de Somaize, and they discovered that he could wield a fierce and bitter pen. He attempted to overwhelm Molière with sarcasm and calumny in a series of pamphlets, and even ventured in a *Dictionnaire des Précieuses* to defame the members of the *précieuses galantes*.

He gave the addresses at Paris where they met, and the names of their lovers, while exaggerating their indiscretions. Not daring to say that Ninon lacked intelligence, he attempted to humiliate her by saying that her beauty, if she ever had any, was declining. No one took any notice of his remarks nor was frightened by them, which was perhaps unfortunate. Ninon did not attach any importance to them.

At this time (1660–1661) she was much taken up with the fate of her house in the Rue des Tournelles. It was a small house, but quite large enough for her comfort. The proprietors were Louis and Pierre Duboille, who were crippled with debts, and they threatened to sell it and turn Ninon out.

It seemed to Ninon a good opportunity of buying the property and making sure of being able to keep her home. She discussed her fears and intentions with her visitors, with the result that one of them, Gérard du Burg, offered of his own accord to help her. He was a quick-tempered, quarrelsome

bordélaise, "a thorough Gascon," who was always making himself ridiculous by his comic adventures. Ninon probably welcomed him in the first place because he amused her. He was anxious to meet celebrities and she may have discovered qualities in him that led her to accord him her sympathy. He was neither a lover nor a supporter, and in accepting his offer Ninon did nothing that anyone might not have done. Both entered into a contract which they thought would be mutually advantageous. They agreed each to buy a half share in the house in the Rue des Tournelles. Gérard du Burg took formal possession of the house on the 27th May, 1661, in his own name before the lawyers who had drawn up the deed of acquisition, and by a special declaration recognised Ninon's rights as half-proprietor.

On the following 9th June he signed a document according to which Ninon was to enjoy the use of the house during her lifetime and the whole property was to revert to the co-proprietor on her death. If he, however, predeceased her she would receive the entire property. Henceforward her home was her own. Léon Fourreau, her pseudo-banker, probably bore the expense of this unusual transaction.

For a long time she was occupied with repairs and alterations which were needed to adapt the

house to her taste, and she had no time for the questions which had previously interested her. When she regained her leisure she took part with great enthusiasm in the production of *L'école des maris*, the comedy which expounded so clearly the principles of the *précieuses galantes*, by representing on the stage the case of the bold women who formed circles for the purpose of waging war on the abuse of paternal power and of discussing the burning problem of marriage.

Ninon and Molière had now become very friendly. The departure, or rather flight, of Saint-Evremond had left a great void in Ninon's heart. He had been obliged to leave France for having criticised the royal policy in a confidential letter, which was discovered by Colbert's spies during Foucquet's trial. Molière did not replace the absent one in Ninon's heart or make her forget him, but he too was an epicurean and spoke the same language, and Ninon in listening to him could almost imagine that it was the exile speaking. He had no part in the amorous part of her life, and they only met on intellectual ground. They combined together to fight the religious party, and through Ninon's aid Molière was enabled to penetrate into a society which gave him material for his works.

L'école des femmes continued the work begun in *L'école des maris*. It was born of the direct contact

of the writer with the *précieuses galantes*, and shows another aspect of the matrimonial problem of which Ninon's friends were seeking the solution.

Some sort of collaboration undoubtedly existed between Ninon and the poet, and towards the end of 1663 or the beginning of 1664 Molière was planning a more direct crusade against the religious party and particularly against the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement*. He submitted his general outline of *Tartuffe* to Ninon for inspection. Ninon gave him the portrait of his hero, whom she had already held up to ridicule in the *Coquette vengée*.

Since the publication of that piece other rascals of the same stamp as Lesclache and Juvenel had found their way into her house. One of them, the Abbé de Pons, had especially impressed her by his extraordinarily cynical depravity. He fell in love with her, declared his passion, and tried to excuse his sensual aberration by quoting the pious examples of Saint Paul and Saint François de Sales, who were, like himself, tempted by the devil.

According to Tallemant, Ninon provided Molière with the original of *Tartuffe* in this Abbé de Pons. Tallemant's information about Ninon is always worth consideration, because he knew her well and was in her confidence; but in this case it is more probable that Molière drew his material from his own observations here, there and everywhere, and

built up his work synthetically. As soon as it was finished he read it to the King, and then brought it to the Rue des Tournelles. He was thus sure of the approval of a prince who, being no enemy to pleasure, was therefore tormented by the bigots, as well as the support of the *précieuses galantes*. The piece, still in its unpolished state, was performed at a fête at Versailles on 12th May, 1664, and the war against religious hypocrisy was declared. For five years Molière had to stand up to the merciless attacks of bitter enemies, and Ninon seconded him vigorously. If her ally fell it would mean defeat for her and her flock. Unfortunately, no record exists of her personal activity in the struggle. So complete is the silence about her, in fact, that it might be suspected that a new love affair was occupying her and keeping her out of public affairs.

The *Roman bourgeois*, which appeared in 1666, was provided with a key drawn up by imaginative interpretators. The author, Antoine Furetière, depicted Ninon under the allegorical name of Polyphila, a woman of moderate beauty and affected manners, who was preoccupied with fashions and personal adornment and was desperately in love with Guillaume Louis Pécour, a stupid and ugly-looking dancer.

According to Bret, who based a passage of his biography on this more than doubtful testimony,

Ninon's choice was not this vulgar dancer, but the Comte Claude de Choiseul, a worthy warrior, who went through life with a dull mind and unfailing kindliness. He relates how Ninon one day, utterly tired of his boring attentions, threw in his face a verse which Corneille puts into the mouth of *Cornélie* in the third act of *Pompée:*

Seigneur, que de vertus vous me faites haïr!

As a matter of fact Ninon could not have been interested in Pécour, because in 1665, the date assigned to their supposed liaison, the future dancer was only twelve years old. The biographer, being short of facts, must have filled up his story from imagination. It is only in 1667 that authentic information about Ninon's movements is on record, and then she is found at the Law Courts, whither she had been hailed by the Sieur David Dromont, controller of the salaries of Parliamentary officials for Normandy.

It was her kind heart that had brought her there. A ghost from her youth, Alexandre d'Elbène, had turned up at her house. For many years he had been living for the gratification of his senses, and had indulged in every form of vice and dissipation, haunted cabarets and taverns, given lavish feasts and showered presents on women, and sorrowfully awoke to the fact that his purse was empty. From being opulent, he was now poor and even needy,

and lived by borrowing, since he could not bring himself to give up his pleasures. He had confessed his predicament to Ninon and she, overcome with pity and in an endeavour to keep him out of further mischief, offered him her pecuniary aid. Her generosity was in vain and powerless to avert disaster. His creditors fell upon him and dragged him off to the tribunal which dealt with disputes about money.

In order to protect her own interests Ninon had then to sell certain mortgages belonging to her friend, which he had given her as security for her loans. Several of these mortgages had been already granted to third persons, and Ninon claimed in preference to them. But one of them, David Dromont, disputed this claim and won his case and the possession of his easily-earned gains.

Ninon, however, did not regret having intervened in this unfortunate affair in response to her ideals of friendship, and she continued to help Elbène with money and, moreover, acted as go-between between him and Saint-Evremond, little thinking that by this imprudence she was letting herself in for more trouble.

Elbène had once borrowed two thousand three hundred *livres* from Saint-Evremond and had never repaid them. After his departure from France Saint-Evremond had vegetated in London for four

years and had then established himself in Holland, where he passed some years in poverty and misery.

In 1668 he met, at the Hague, Anne d'Hervart, a Huguenot financier, who told him that Alexandre d'Elbène had married Charlotte de La Fontaine, widow of Louis de Rennes, Comte de Cochefort, with the idea of settling down. Saint-Evremond naturally thought that a man who was able to maintain a wife ought to be able to pay his debts. He therefore charged the financier to put his claims firmly before Elbène, who promised to send some money, but did not do so. Saint-Evremond persisted in his attempt to get his just dues, and in 1669 had renewed the attempt, when Ninon interfered. She cautioned Elbène and undertook to pay the money out of her own pocket, especially one sum of one hundred *pistoles*.

This business revived a correspondence which had begun to languish. Saint-Evremond at first addressed very friendly messages to Ninon either directly or through Anne d'Hervart. Then, as he still received no money and was himself harassed with debts, he wrote to d'Hervart:

"If you see Mademoiselle de Lanclos, I beg you to assure her that no one is her more humble servant than I am, although I have heard nothing further about the 100 *pistoles* than if there had never been any *pistoles* in the world. Her good faith is

great, but my absence is long, and after eight years there is nothing more easy than not to remember people when the memory costs 100 *pistoles*."

Ninon was terribly hurt and let d'Hervart see that she was. Saint-Evremond apologised, and Ninon shortly afterwards sent the 100 *pistoles* with a stiff letter. It would have been only fair, she said, for him to have waited until she herself had been able to extract a few pence from their common debtor. "If you consider the matter carefully," she added, "you will see that you ought not to rail at one who is your banker. Love me well enough, however, to put up with my censure."

At the same time she ordered Saint-Evremond to reduce Elbène's indebtedness by 1,135 *livres*. Thus at her own expense she managed to settle affairs between the two. It would have been better for her, however, not to have mixed up friendship with money matters. A certain amount of constraint remained between her and Saint-Evremond, and their correspondence dropped for a while. Ninon, moreover, while all this was going on, had again fallen in love, this time seriously, with a young man of twenty-three years, Charles de Sévigné. He had a girlish countenance and languishing eyes, and his figure was supple and willowy. Their liaison began some time between the 6th and 13th May, 1671, and the Marquise de

Sévigné chronicled its progress. She had forgotten latterly her old feud with Ninon, met her at the performance of Le Camus's symphonies, and was quite ready to be friends. Then her son confided his secret to her. It was a great blow.

"Your brother," she wrote to Madame de Grignan, "has fallen into Ninon's power. I am afraid she will do him no good. There are minds upon whom her influence is bad, and she ruined your father. Let us recommend him to God. When one is a Christian woman, or at least tries to be one, such disorderliness cannot be regarded without sorrow."

Madame de Sévigné expressed no violent resentment, and it is probable that she thought the affair could not last long. Charles de Sévigné was an ineffectual youth, and his mother can be readily forgiven for preferring his sister, Madame de Grignan, to him. He had a mediocre mind, and nothing was to be expected of him but cheerful futility. He had a reputation for bravery, however, and his mother's panegyrists naturally try to make the most of the little taste and intelligence he possessed, while extolling his domestic virtues.

Ninon treated him as a plaything, and rejoiced in her ability to attract such a charming youngster in spite of her fifty-one years. He refreshed her and she was very nearly in love with him, besides being almost jealous of him. When she paraded

him in the *Cours* it actually hurt her to see him look at other women. "You certainly know how to ogle," she said, and became angry, striking him furiously and then kissing him. Her endeavours to raise him to her own intellectual and physical level were useless, and she wondered how such a sorry fellow had succeeded in taking the famous Champmeslé from Racine. She longed to get him away from this actress altogether, fearing her youth, and even demanded that he should hand over her letters in order that she might use them against her. Charles yielded them up. He had no will power, and he allowed himself to be dragged to the "delicious little suppers" that Ninon arranged for him at Saint Germain, and at which he looked like a martyr.

Ninon soon realised that her passion was struggling against the instinctive piety and asceticism which later led Charles de Sévigné to the life of a monk. She tried to overcome it, but the Marquise's influence prevented her.

"What a dangerous woman that Ninon is," she wrote. "We are doing our best, Madame de La Fayette and I, to get him out of this dangerous entanglement."

By dint of pointing out to the young man how disgraceful his conduct was, they succeeded in making him get back Champmeslé's letters, but probably their efforts to secure his personal release

would have been unavailing if Ninon had not become tired of him and dismissed him.

"He is past belief," she said, "with the mind of a milksop and a heart like an iced pumpkin." One month of him had sufficed to make her fall out of love with him for ever.

Charles de Sévigné lost both Ninon and the Champmeslé at the same time, but he did not care, for he had inherited none of his father's temperament and had little sensuality in his nature.

He appears to have been Ninon's last lover. People credit her also with Charles Paris d'Orléans, the son of Madame de Longueville by the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, a young fellow who was in the toils of a marquise and who is supposed to have said to her in a beseeching voice, "Mademoiselle, save me from that fat Marquise de Castelnau." There is, however, no documentary proof that his prayer was answered.

Ninon has been the victim of much calumny, and her detractors try to make out that her lascivity was prolonged to the threshold of the tomb. Following the example of Voltaire, biographers have piled up rubbish of this sort until their volumes can no longer be read without a smile.[1] In contrast

[1] Jean Banier, a Swede, was said by some writers to have been Ninon's lover when she was in her sixties; the Abbés Gedoyn and Châteauneuf, according to others, when she was ninety, and she is even credited with an attempt to seduce Bourdaloue at the same age.

to these tarradiddles, which show singular ignorance of the intelligence and discretion of their heroine, is the account of Madame, Duchesse d'Orléans. "Now that Madame de Lanclos is old, she leads a very strict life. She maintains, so they say, that she would never have reformed if she herself had not realised how ridiculous the whole affair was."

Ninon did not wait, therefore, for old age before she gave up her excursions into the land of pleasure. After dismissing Sévigné, she wrote to Saint-Evremond, who had been praising her enduring charm.

"I told you that my charms are now solid and severe, and you know you mustn't jest with a personage." This is the truth, since Ninon always loathed hypocrisy. Her formal evidence utterly destroys the wild imaginings of the story-tellers.

CHAPTER IX

HAVING obtained enough money from Léon Fourreau to enable her to live in comfort for the rest of her life, Ninon proceeded to rid herself of him. She had always disliked the necessity of being beholden to those vulgar financiers with their airs of proprietorship, and being now in her fifties she decided to buy an annuity with her little fortune. About the 23rd of January, 1669, therefore, she made over a sum of 25,000 *livres* to the *Hôpital des Incurables* in exchange for an income of 2,000 *livres*. And year by year she made other such transactions. She drew 1,000 *livres* per annum from the town of Lyons, and 1,700 from the salt duties, while two private individuals, Frédéric Charles de La Rochefoucauld, Comte de Roye, and Antoine Coiffier, Marquis d'Effiat, whose love of gambling and especially of *la bassette* had led them to borrow from her, paid her 1,200 and 800 *livres* interest respectively. She had a total of 7,000 *livres* of income, which represented a modest competence sufficient to make her independent. Probably she kept some loose money by her to draw upon for unforeseen expenses, or, it might be, to help her less

fortunate friends. At this time she seems frequently to have lent to friends sums of money varying from 3,000 to 5,000 *livres*. Being unversed in finance, she took the advice of two clever men who were her intimate friends, François Lange, her lawyer, and François Arouet, Voltaire's father. Lange drew up all her public and official agreements, whilst Arouet conducted her secret business, and acted in particular as intermediary between her and her son Louis-François de Mornay, who had recently entered the navy as a cadet and was stationed at Toulon.

Having thus made her preparations well beforehand for an honest and respectable demise, Ninon was able to plan the rest of her life to suit herself, and when she determined to be done with love she replaced it with friendship. She continued to foster the qualities which Montaigne raised to the rank of virtues, and which Saint-Evremond considered the best gift of a generous nature. Friendship therefore became her chief pre-occupation, and she resolved to choose as her friends only those people who were worthy of her esteem. Her epicureanism was dead, but she remained a sceptic—a sceptic, that is, in the domain of ideas, not in the realm of the heart.

"Durability in friendship," she wrote, "is at least as rare as durability in love. Time was when

I cared only for the latter, now I long for the former." And again, "The time has come when I want nothing but my friends." She became deeply attached by bonds of intellect and affection to Madame de La Sablière, a young woman with a face like that of a fair-haired angel, but whose large blue eyes were clouded with melancholy. Madame de La Sablière had come to live in a house in the Rue des Petits Champs, after enduring years of persecution by her husband Antoine Rambouillet, Sieur de La Sablière, a former lover of Ninon's. Rambouillet was unfaithful and parsimonious, had deprived his wife of her possessions and of her children, and had even forced her to undergo semi-confinement in a convent. She had, therefore, escaped from the refinement of torture and seemed to be taking on a new lease of life. Her behaviour as a wife had been irreproachable, and she was well able to testify to the unhappy fate of many women. She did not, however, ally herself with the rebels who were still protesting against man's domination in the household, and she was not to be met with in the drawing-rooms of the *précieuses galantes*. Worn out and crushed, she was seeking forgetfulness of her spiritual unhappiness in the cultivation of her mind. Ninon admired her erudition, her knowledge of Greek and Latin, and her taste for mathematics and philosophy,

as well as her ceaseless thirst for knowledge in the domains of science and the arts. She also pitied her for being a prey to her conscience, which curbed her faculty for enjoyment and at the same time increased her unhappiness.

The two women understood each other thoroughly and forgathered as often as they could. Ninon would often set out in her slow-going chair from her distant quarter of the Marais, and betake herself to Saint-Roch, where many interesting people dwelt. Madame de La Sablière was a Huguenot, but was passing through a phase of her life in which she no longer found peace and consolation in religion. She took under her wing François Bernier, philosopher and physician, who had recently returned from a long journey to the country of the Great Mogul and undertook to expound for her the doctrines of his old master Gassendi. Thereafter her sympathies were divided between epicureanism and cartesianism, and she became an active propagator of new ideas.

Secret conventicles often took place at her house, and there Ninon used to meet Molière and to cultivate the acquaintance of Boileau. Towards the end of the year 1671 she helped them in an attack on the Faculty of Theology, which was threatening to proscribe Descartes and his works on the grounds of alleged impiety. Molière at

first thought of carrying the quarrel on to the stage, but he decided not to do so. Bernier and Boileau, however, urged him to carry out his plan. To the accompaniment of an uproar he produced a burlesque which made a mock of the Sorbonne, with the result that they suddenly gave up their idea of taking violent action against the leaders of the New Thought.

At her friend's house Ninon was able to steep herself in the intellectual atmosphere which always seems to have been a necessity to her. As time went on this free-thinking group in the parish of Saint-Roch became more cohesive, and extended its circle. Molière and the painter Mignard, who were both frequent visitors, became friends. They both lived near Madame de La Sablière. The genial La Fontaine was another who enjoyed Madame de La Sablière's protection. He had been reduced by the death of his former protectress, the Duchesse d'Orléans, to drifting from house to house in Paris. Her brother-in-law, Tallemant des Réaux, who also lived near by, in the Rue Neuve des Fosses Montmartre, came to her house, where his caustic wit was much enjoyed.

The little street where Madame de La Sablière dwelt was full of sceptics. There many social and philosophical problems were discussed, while the old war against the religious party waged unflaggingly.

Satire was a joy to them, and they heartily approved when Molière deserted the comedy of character and returned again to the criticism of manners with the *Femmes savantes*, attempting by his sage counsels to find a ground for the reconciliation of divided families.

Unfortunately, no chronicler has told us the subjects of conversation treated at Madame de La Sablière's house, but one of them tells how the hostess, dreading solitude and hating to part from her guests, used to keep them all for dinner.

One evening Ninon, Boileau, Bernier and Molière found themselves thus united around the table, at the time when Molière was preparing for the presentation of the *Malade Imaginaire.* He was ill and tired with a mortal tiredness, overwhelmed with worry, hindered in the development of his theatre by bitter opposition. He confided his troubles to his friends. Always dreading the caprices of the fickle public, which plays with an author's thoughts as a cat plays with a mouse, he feared that his new comedy was going to be a failure, because he had placed the action in an invalid's bedroom, hardly the place to provoke laughter. Everyone tried to cheer him up, and Boileau, smiling his affected little smile, asked him to read extracts from the play. Molière thereupon related the story of Argau, recited passages from the prologue, explained the action,

and repeated with emphasis the biting words with which he scourged the doctors. Boileau, supported enthusiastically by the ladies, hailed it as a masterpiece. Molière thereupon explained that it was to finish with a third act in which he caricatured the absurd ceremonial with which doctors received their degrees. He had already written several verses of it in dog Latin, but the details were not yet worked out. Bernier expressed his admiration of Molière's ingenious buffoonery and offered his assistance, which was promptly accepted. He was a doctor of the Faculty of Montpellier, of which the ceremonial was the most elaborate in France, and he still remembered the pedantic pomp of that home of learning and thought that he could reconstitute it for the purposes of farce.

They set to work immediately to plan the parody. Bernier first of all appointed Madame de La Sablière and Ninon to be the chorus, while he himself took his place in an armchair representing the president's chair, whilst Boileau, seated before him, represented the bachelor and Molière the concourse of doctors taking part in the ceremony To begin with he declaimed the famous *Discours de Vespéris*, substituting the praise of the benefits conferred by the medical profession for the traditional eulogy of the Faculty. Next he interrogated the candidate Boileau with grave demeanour.

Facetious questions and answers, improvised by their ready wits, poured forth, punctuated by the refrain of the chorus—

Bene, bene, bene, bene respondre,
Dignus, dignus est intrare.
In nostro doctro corpore.

In an hour they had constructed the framework of the act which afterwards convulsed the town with laughter and the Faculty with rage. Molière used all their scenes and many of their best witticisms. Ninon had laughed as heartily as the rest, but little did she imagine what an historic evening it had been. With great distress she learnt shortly afterwards of the playwright's death, and of the violent behaviour of the religious party around his coffin.

Ninon continued to visit the house in the parish of Saint-Roch ; but gradually the tone of the gatherings over which Madame de La Sablière presided changed. Many gallants found their way there hoping to drive the sadness from their hostess's face by their compliments and witticisms. Ninon observed how her friend became gradually more and more interested in the graceful wooing of the Marquis de La Fare. She knew that she had concealed a longing for love under the veil of austerity which she wore, and she now saw that this longing was coming to a stage at which Madame de La

Sablière would cease to struggle against it. Ninon therefore judged it more discreet to feign ignorance.

Besides, whilst this love affair was ripening she herself was busy cultivating a new friendship. Madame de La Sablière had one day introduced to her François d'Usson de Bonrepaus, a gentleman of Lyons. And she had found him a very agreeable companion. In appearance he was not attractive, being short and stout, with a rather ludicrous face and a provincial accent, but he was genial and courteous and possessed fine feelings and a gentle manner. He was, moreover, sagacious and tactful, and the King and Colbert thought highly of him as an administrator. Boileau, La Fontaine, Racine, and Madame de La Fayette used to go about praising his gifts as a conversationalist and a letter-writer. He was, in short, a fine fellow in every way. Ninon soon discovered how obliging he was, because he offered to help her son Louis-François de Mornay, who had been degraded from his rank for some youthful folly, and, though shortly afterwards reinstated in his rank, had lost his promotion. They began to exchange letters, at first reserved in tone, then gradually warmer. Ninon interviewed her son, then became bolder, and requested that he might be sent to join the western Fleet under Monsieur d'Estrée at Brest. She was careful not to use

the tone of one begging a favour, but Monsieur de Bonrepaus immediately granted her wish, and even procured an unexpected promotion for the young harum-scarum.

"I thoroughly appreciate what you have done," wrote Ninon, and later: "You may rest assured that in me you have a friend as devoted as useless."

She was grateful and longed to be able to do something for him in return. Time only increased her affectionate gratitude for this benefactor of her son.

Ninon, meantime, thought that it would be unseemly to intrude upon Madame de La Sablière and La Fare at the moment when their love rejoiced in solitude, so she temporarily abandoned them to their happiness.

Moreover, a new trouble about her house arose to prevent her drives across Paris. In the year 1661, it will be remembered, Ninon and Gérard du Burg had shared equally in purchasing the house in the Rue des Tournelles, and a deed drawn up after the purchase specified that she was to have the use of the house during her lifetime and was to bequeath it on her death to her friend. When Gérard du Burg signed this agreement he was counting his chickens before they were hatched and reckoning on his own longevity. He later became President of the Parliament of Bordeaux

and went to live quietly there, awaiting a heritage which was slow in coming. While he was still waiting he died. And Ninon, having expressed her grief in a befitting manner, set about turning herself from tenant into owner and pleaded the clauses of their common gift. Gérard du Burg's heirs must have opposed her claim, because she had to resort to a subterfuge to obtain her end.

A certain Louis de Mondion, formerly a steward in Anne of Austria's household, suddenly claimed a sum of 3,000 *livres* from her, and secured an injunction against her on the 12th of August, 1677. By this she was ordered to pay the 3,000 *livres* and costs to the amount of 600 *livres*. Ninon refused to obey this sentence, and her adversary immediately proceeded to sequestrate her property. The bailiffs posted their notices and announced the seizure before witnesses on four consecutive Sundays before the door of the Parish Church of Saint Paul, just as the people were coming out from Mass.

As Ninon still refused to pay, the property was formally seized on the 21st of March, 1678. An agent, Monsieur Guy, thereupon came forward and bought the house for the sum of 11,600 *livres*, and shortly afterwards it was announced that he had made the purchase on behalf of Mademoiselle Anne de Lanclos.

There is no reason why she should have refused to pay the 3,000 *livres* and have consented afterwards

to put down 11,600 *livres*, unless the transaction was for the purpose of definitely securing her title to the house. She would have been very sorry to leave the Rue des Tournelles, the familiar aspect of which was dear to her. Although she had given up the pursuit of love, she liked to remain under the pleasant roof which harboured so many happy memories.

Having become proprietress of the house beyond all dispute, she set herself to plan a dwelling in which she would be able to find ease and comfort for the rest of her life. Tallemant des Réaux, who was much in her company about this time, wrote: "Her house is nicely furnished." Scant information, to be sure, but fortunately legal documents enable us to reconstruct the internal decoration of the house in which she lived until her death. The entrance was through a carriage gate into a passage which widened out into a courtyard. In this passage stood Ninon's small and elegantly appointed chair with its yellow-striped satin lining, three curtains of striped taffetas, and fine glass windows. The kitchen opened on to the courtyard, and was hidden from the eyes of visitors by a green serge door-curtain.

Marguerite, the cook, and Catherine, the maid-of-all-work, had to work there in semi-darkness, but they possessed a wonderful array of copper and tin in which to cook elaborate meals. On one side

of the kitchen was a huge chimney-piece bearing candelabra and the spit, and a large pot was suspended from it by hook and chain. The flames from the fire were reflected in shovel, tongs, and fire-dogs of burnished steel.

On another wall was a huge oaken dresser, and two cupboards jostled chairs covered with well-worn tapestry. A copper cistern shone on the dresser and the shelves were laden with chafing-dishes, a fish-kettle, a coffee-pot, salt-box, and white marble pestle and mortar. From hooks hung pots and pans, skewers, gridiron, dripping-pan, chestnut roasters and sweetmeat tins.

From the dark, dimly-lit kitchen in which such exquisite feasts were prepared daily there was a staircase leading directly to Ninon's own apartments on the first floor. These consisted of an ante-chamber, a closet, a little room looking out on to the courtyard, and Ninon's bedroom. These rooms were the most luxurious in the house. A new arrival would first enter the closet, the walls of which were covered with Flemish tapestry, while on a marble mantelpiece were nine pieces of faience, flanking a massive clock by Théodore Denise, which was enclosed in an ebony case ornamented with gold. There was little furniture in this room, but what there was was very handsome—a walnut cupboard inlaid with brass wire, a table, a stand

for candlesticks, and several rugs of flowered hammer-cloth, as well as a couch covered with rich tapestry.

Out of this charming room opened a pleasant lounge, hung with satin and sheltered from draughts by gay shutters. There were many pictures and engravings, mostly landscapes and portraits, on the walls. A thermometer and a barometer hung one on each side of the fire-place, which was screened by a fire-guard of embroidered Chinese satin. Over the fire-place, on shelves arranged pyramidically, were pots and vases of fine china. There was a bookcase containing sixty volumes of all sizes bound in calf and parchment. A bed covered with magnificent Indian silk, two small tables in precious wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gilded copper, and several arm-chairs covered with gorgeous silks, completed the furnishing of the room.

All these things were tastefully arranged and gave to the room an air of gaiety, which was also a characteristic of Ninon's bedroom, which was all hung with taffetas in a striped and checked pattern.[1] Although an immense room, it was greatly overcrowded. Plainly the mistress of the house received her guests here, and hither, too, she had brought all the most beautiful pieces of furniture and

[1] There is no mention in *L'inventaire des biens de Ninon* of the famous yellow room, which she used to lend to Villarceaux and Madame Scarron.

works of art that she possessed. From the mantelpiece, on which a vast pier-glass reflected beautiful pieces of china, the gaze wandered to the walls, on which were two mirrors of bevelled glass and seventeen pictures in gilt frames; landscapes, flowers and the portraits of friends smiled from these canvases. One picture, which Ninon had but recently acquired, had a whole panel to itself. It was a picture of the Virgin, with the infant Jesus and the Apostle John, and represented Ninon's final abnegation of the world of the flesh. Seated before the log-fire which burnt on a grill ornamented with four copper apples, Ninon used to recall the days of her youth, but she experienced no pangs of remorse and never felt called upon to expel from her surroundings pieces of furniture and other objects which were the silent witnesses of her former licentiousness. On the contrary, she cherished them all to the day of her death. As she sat in the semi-darkness with the silken curtains drawn, they must often have been her confidants. Large green screens hid the ugly pieces and set off the beauty of others. Nothing on earth would have made her part with the bed which was associated with so much of her happiness. It stood on four oaken bases with carved pillars, which were surmounted by a "Duchess" canopy. Its solidity was made soft and springy with deep mattresses

and heaped-up pillows. Soft silk curtains enclosed it, and a lace counterpane hid the sheets, which were threadbare with use. It quite overwhelmed the large, silk-covered couch on which Ninon used to recline while she read some book from the neighbouring bookcase. There were tables of oak and cedar, the shapeliness of which set off the Turkish carpet. Graceful candlesticks and Chinese tables holding lacquer boxes mingled with a heterogeneous collection of sofas, chairs and stools, in embossed satin, damask, plush or tapestry. In the comparative isolation of corners stood a desk at which Ninon kept her accounts, a bureau with eighteen drawers which held her love-letters, and a writing-desk all shimmering with gold and marquetry,[1] where affectionate and lively letters to her friends were written with a pen dipped in a silver inkstand.

[1] There is in the possession of the Vicomte de Cossette a bureau which came from the Château d'Eu, and was bought by the Vicomte at the sale of the property of the Orléans family after the departure of Louis-Philippe. On one of the drawers is the inscription :—

> "This bureau was sold by me, Guillaume Sachiez, cabinet-maker, 17 Rue du Temple, January 10, 1680, to Mademoiselle Ninon de Lanclos, 25 louis."

The description in the *Inventaire des biens de Ninon* corresponds with this writing-desk, but as the decoration is different it may have been redecorated in the style of Louis XVI at some later date.

It is not known whether Ninon ate her meals in this room. The inventory of her possessions enumerates her rich and important-looking table silver, but it does not describe the room in which were held the famous banquets, at which Ninon, the water-bibber, used to become so elated by the gaiety and sparkle of the conversation that she appeared to be "drunk, from the soup on." She may have done away with her dining-room in her old age, because she herself was little enamoured of the pleasures of the table. All that remained to her of her former materialism was centred in the care of her person. She did all that she could to ward off old age, and in spite of her inclination to corpulency she kept the suppleness of her figure, her charming vivacity, and the freshness of her complexion. People who were astonished at the persistence of her youth pretended that she owed it to a pact she had made with the devil. Others maintained that she preserved herself from the ravages of age by using an elixir of youth or some mysterious cream or philtre. All nonsense, of course! Ninon's recipe was the simple one of scrupulously practising the rules of hygiene and thus preserving her flesh from premature flabbiness. She avoided late nights and all excess of eating and drinking, the sources, she was wont to say, of premature senility.

Ninon could never endure the contact of coarse linen, and her chemises were all made of the finest white lawn and her handkerchiefs of transparent batiste. Round her neck and arms she wore her favourite Malines lace. Probably she had no love for jewellery, because there is no trace in her inventory of the ring which was given to her by the Marquis de Sévigné. She loved fine clothes, however, and continued scrupulously to don her black satin stays right up to her last illness. She disliked the heavy brocades and materials strewn with gold and silver with which the ladies of the time bedecked themselves, and in her whole wardrobe she had only one or two skirts or petticoats of damask or tabby. Her preference was for silks and satins, especially Indian silks, and light gauzes. Her mantles, indoor dresses, skirts and petticoats were all made and lined with these materials, and she did not care how bright their colours were. Indoors or outdoors it mattered not—she knew that bright colours suited her colouring. Striped and mottled materials, flowers, embroidery and beading she liked, and she knew that violets, browns and greens, far from killing her complexion, served only to enhance its delicacy.

When she had finally installed herself in her own house, Ninon dropped her youthful pseudonym for ever and took to using her family name and arms,

in order to enhance their prestige. Henceforward she was always known as Mademoiselle de Lanclos.

If Ninon had been the mere vulgar gossip described by the ungrateful Voltaire, the number of visitors to her house would certainly have fallen off, since they no longer had the same interested reasons for visiting her as formerly; but her house at this period was more popular than ever. It had become one of the intellectual centres of Paris and people eagerly sought the favour of being received there, and it was the dream of even prudish women to be recognised in her circle as wits.

Contemporary writers thought to glorify her by comparing Mademoiselle de Lanclos with Aspasia and Leontium, but that is an obvious error, because although they took part in the discussions of the ancient philosophers, their influence never passed beyond a limited circle. Ninon's influence, on the contrary, extended over the whole of Parisian society. According to Saint-Simon, "Everything at Mademoiselle de Lanclos' is done with a respect and decorum which is rarely enjoyed even by the best-loved princesses in the conduct of their affairs." She had, therefore, the noblest and most attractive people at Court for friends. So much was this so that it became the fashion to be received at her house, and people used to like to go there on account of the people they met. There was no

gaming, ribaldry, nor brawling, and no one discussed politics or religion. Humour and elaborate wit, talk of things ancient and modern, news of everyone's love affairs, were the order of the day; but everything was discussed delicately and tolerantly, with no hint of malice, and the hostess knew how to keep conversation going by her intelligence and her great wealth of information about this and every age."

Dangeau seconds this eulogy, and so do La Fare and the whole band of memoir writers. Even Madame, Duchesse d'Orléans, writing in praise of the inhabitant of the Rue des Tournelles, seems for once to have dipped her pen in rosewater. "There is not," she says, "a better fellow anywhere than Mademoiselle de Lanclos, and everyone says she is very modest in her behaviour and speech."[1] To obtain the sympathy of this German princess, with her biting tongue, was indeed a triumph for Ninon, after which the accounts of the Vicomte de Ségur and even Voltaire lose their value. Their accounts were, moreover, written after Ninon's death.

It may be wondered how Ninon came to deserve such praise. The secret of it lay in her personal charm. She captivated people, and in her company

[1] *The Letters of Madame* (translated and edited by the present writer), vol. i. p. 162.

they felt at ease and sure of being understood and liked. Ninon did not require people to be virtuous, but they had to be of superior intelligence and free from fanaticism and affectation. No stupid or pedantic person need ever come near her. The conversation she liked best was that based on solid facts, gracefully presented. She was an eloquent conversationalist, and was able to condense into a few simple sentences the whole gist of her reading and experience. Nowhere in the works of the philosophers would a young man find a more beautiful and optimistic rule of life than that which she propounded:

"The aim of common sense is to learn to be happy, and in order to do that it is only necessary to look at everything with an unbiased mind. . . . A man's intelligence is measured by his happiness."

Sometimes Ninon, talking of the art of love, would break into parable:

"Leave all talk of the sublime and all beautiful sentiments to the greenhorn; let him play the whining lover. I tell you on behalf of my fellow-women that there are times when they would rather be treated roughly than respected too highly. More women's hearts are saved by men's awkwardness than by their own virtue."

Although she retired in her old age from active

participation in the struggle for emancipation which the *précieuses galantes* were still carrying on, Ninon did not disassociate herself from their efforts, although she criticised them severely.

"You must choose," she said, "between loving women and understanding them." She pitied them, however:

"How unhappy is the lot of women. The members of their own sex are their most cruel enemies. Their husbands tyrannise over them, while their lovers often despise them and bring dishonour upon them. Spied upon by everybody, ceaselessly thwarted, and always in fear and trouble, they live in a state of need and helplessness. They may have hundreds of lovers and not a single real friend. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that they are peevish, capricious and deceitful."

But although Ninon criticised her fellow-women she also championed them:

"How amusing it is that women should be compelled to be modest when the quality they admire most in men is audacity."

Her own advice to them is as follows:

"A sensible woman will consult her reason before she takes a husband, but her heart when she takes a lover."

La Rochefoucauld himself need not have been ashamed of some of Ninon's maxims, but he would

have disapproved of their kindly spirit. Kindliness, however, was the quality that Ninon admired the most of all. She knew from the experience of her long lifetime what a charm there is about a person who is endowed with a kindly and sympathetic nature. She herself had other qualities as well which people found attractive, notably her refined taste.

" Beauty," wrote Châteauneuf, " always appealed to her wherever she found it, and her taste, which was a sort of instinct, infinitely more reliable than reason, enabled her to recognise it wherever it might be."

This explains why she always hated bigotry, which she considered unbeautiful.

Nothing deterred her, even if it were a question of attacking a member of the Academy. One day Jacques de Tourreil, the translator of Demosthenes, made a speech which was full of quotations, and she did not hesitate to hold his academic eloquence up to public scorn.

Another day she embarked upon the praiseworthy task of crushing the doctorial vanity of Rémond de Saint-Marc, nicknamed Rémond the Greek. He was a little scholarling, looking like a " badly-made biscuit," with a large nose, great round protruding eyes, and coarse common features, and he spoke hoarsely, like a man who has been wakened

suddenly in the middle of the night. In character he was impertinent, scornful, and a braggart. Ninon became thoroughly tired out without making any headway in her task of curing his vanity, and finally gave it up as a bad job and sent him away, saying: "I have banished him from my school because he has quite a wrong outlook upon philosophy and the world, and was not fit for such intelligent company as mine. When God had made man He repented. I feel the same about Rémond."

Such people helped to increase her love of simplicity. Mignard was complaining disconsolately one day that although his daughter had been educated with care, her memory was so bad that she could never remember what her masters taught her. Ninon replied, "You may think yourself lucky, because she will never be able to quote."

Mademoiselle de Lanclos stormed at the pedants and held herself aloof from everything that offended her delicacy, but she always welcomed opportunities of improving her mind. She threw herself wholeheartedly into the study of music, and probably did not find the operas which were then being produced by the Royal Academy entirely to her liking. For one thing she despised the prevalent habit of fitting to the music words which were only fit for the servants' hall, and of using music to accompany the most trivial and commonplace

actions. She used to arrange charming concerts for her guests, at which performers chosen by herself played the newest works.[1]

Sometimes, but only very rarely, she herself would play or take part in discussions on current music started by François de Châstaigner, Abbé de Châteauneuf and the Jesuit François Fraguier. These two learned personages used to sum up for her benefit all the knowledge they had acquired by studying the writers of antiquity, and she in her turn revealed to them the secret of her own charm as a musician:

"Feeling is the soul of song, and however little taste the hearer may have he will always prefer emotion to the most brilliant execution, because brilliancy appeals to the ear alone and not to the heart. A fine talent, a beautiful voice, or a finished touch may attract admiration, but only the expression of sincerely felt emotion will move others."

Mademoiselle de Lanclos did not always dwell on these heights, however, and irony and sarcasm became the fashion in her drawing-room. She hated eccentricity in any form and poured ridicule upon it. The Comtesse de Choiseul used to wear her wig at all angles and was even uglier than the fairy Carabosse. Mademoiselle de Lanclos said

[1] A German musician, Pantaléon Hébenstreit, played a new instrument, a dulcimer, at her house with great success.

that she looked like a *printemps de hôtellerie*, a comparison which delighted Madame de Sévigné, but the point of which is now lost. The Maréchal de Choiseul had just been decorated with an order, and one day at her house was gazing rapturously at the blue ribbon which decorated his shoulders, and she murmured impatiently:

"*Monsieur le comte*, if I catch you doing that again I shall recite the names of your companions of the order to you!" There had been, according to Saint-Simon, several elections at that time which "were enough to make one weep."

In the Madame du Tôt, who was to be found chattering away at every reception, Mademoiselle de Lanclos satirised the provincial women who used to come to Paris to "represent the intelligentsia of Rouen," and she amused herself at the expense of the Abbé d'Hacqueville, who was always scurrying from house to house, and, being met with everywhere, seemed to have the gift of ubiquity.

The Abbé Testu (father confessor of the ladies) had thousands of penitents eager for his ministrations in all sorts of places, and she spread a rumour that he was going to be given a bishopric of women only. The Duc de Lesdiguière's jokes, she said, set her teeth on edge like someone scraping a plate with a knife. The Abbé d'Effiat's

eyes were so prominent that she said she expected them to fall out every moment, and thought they ought to have a bandage to keep them in.

"Do you know Fumel, Abbé des Roches?" she asked. "He spends his life at Madame de La Sablière's house listening to philosophical talk which he doesn't understand. His carriage is always at the door, and comes in useful to bring and take away the really intelligent people who meet there but have no carriages. He is philosophy's 'turnspit.'"

A woman who was recently widowed was hypocritically pretending to be heartbroken as she lay on her bed of ceremony. "Didn't I tell you," cried Mademoiselle de Lanclos, "that that woman could succeed in anything?"

"The King," wrote Madame de La Roche to Bussy-Rabutin, "has appointed Madame du Fresnoy a woman of the bedchamber to the Queen, and Ninon made a joke about it that I really must tell you. She says that Monsieur de Louvois was copying Caligula when he made his horse a consul."

Thus they persiflaged at the Rue des Tournelles, and their quips were much dreaded. Louis XIV himself feared the sting of their irony, and according to Arsène Houssaye, he used to ask, each time he made any change in his seraglio, "What did Ninon say about it?" "What extraordinary

times these are when Ninon directs the King's conscience and moulds public opinion."

The King, moreover, did better than merely ask about her views: he remembered what she said. One day a courtier told him about a great dispute that had arisen at the Rue des Tournelles on the subject of the immortality of the soul, between the Abbé de Dangeau, an academician, and the hostess. Ninon upheld the view that the soul perished with the body, and quoted some work or other by the Abbé Pétot, a Carthusian monk, to support her case. Louis XIV said nothing, but three years later when Père Annat proposed that very Carthusian for the bishopric of Sisteron, he exclaimed:

"What, mon père, are you naming a man to me who does not believe in the immortality of the soul?" He refused, moreover, to give him the mitre.

It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that Mademoiselle de Lanclos' influence was felt throughout the whole of Parisian society, since even the haughtiest of kings kept an ear open to what was being said in her drawing-room. Nor is it to be wondered at that distinguished personages were to be found enjoying the hospitality of her house. For thirty years her influence was enormous. The great Condé, who did not lightly accord his respect

to women, and his son, Monsieur le Duc, used to like to go and occupy an armchair there.[1]

When the Raugrave Charles-Louis stayed in Paris he considered himself very lucky to be allowed to visit her a few times. Later, the future Regent, Philippe d'Orléans, who was then quite young, used to be seen there listening with all his might, and Madame, his mother, encouraged him to do so. "My son is a friend of hers (Mademoiselle de Lanclos')," she wrote; "she is very fond of him, and I wish he would visit her more often in preference to his other boon companions. She would inspire him with higher and more noble sentiments than they do."

The company which these princes met at Mademoiselle de Lanclos' house was indeed comprised of the very pick of the intellectual and distinguished

[1] The great Condé used to stop his carriage and greet Ninon whenever he met her in the street. On 20th December, 1669, his son, Monsieur le Duc, wrote as follows about her to Gourville: "I am very glad to be able to tell you that according to what I have heard Ninon has behaved very well in several matters which concerned me. If you write to her, tell her, as if it came from yourself, that I have written that I am very much pleased with her." Gourville replied on the 8th January, 1670: "I have written to Mademoiselle de Lanclos to tell her how pleased I was to learn that your Highness was so well pleased with her behaviour and what she said on those particular occasions. I should not be a friend of hers if I did not endorse your Highness's feelings on the subject." (*Archives de Chantilly.*)

people of the time. Peers of the realm simply swarmed there. The Duc de Vivonne, enormous and always smiling, used to punctuate the conversation with his jests, whilst rubbing elbows with the small, sly and cheeky Duc de Lauzun, and the Ducs de Noirmoutiers and de Tallard. The Marquis de Ruvigny, Deputy Governor of the Reformed Churches in France, used to be heard there relating his experiences as a diplomat, and Monsieur de Pomponne, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, would timidly venture on a little propaganda for his own political methods. It was Ruvigny who began, with many a qualm of misgiving, the struggle against the clergy which ultimately led the King to revoke the Edict of Nantes. Pomponne felt that intrigues at Court were gradually dragging him to eventual disgrace. Both men sought Ninon's advice, and opened their hearts to her with perfect confidence that no weighty secrets of State told to her would ever be made public by her.

Men of letters and artists mingled at the Rue des Tournelles with great nobles and statesmen. Mignard the painter and Lully the musician held forth eagerly on their latest works. Mignard did not disdain the advice of an intelligent woman and sought her approval before displaying his pictures to the public, whilst Lully feared her criticism, which was all-powerful in musical matters, and

never forgot that a word from her would stultify all the bought praise of the gazetteers.

The poet La Fontaine, silent and in a perpetual day-dream, often lounged in an arm-chair at Ninon's house, and Bernier the philosopher would endeavour to drag a few words out of him. Charleval was still there every day, grown old and no longer a gallant, despising even the dainty verses with which he had been wont to woo scornful ladies. He and Ninon would recall together the good old days of the Regency, when morals were not so strict and citizens of the realm had no need to conceal their love of pleasure.

Even in her advancing age there were still poets who rejoiced in singing the praises of Ninon's mind and body. There was the Abbé Regnier-Desmarais, a poor fellow who could not understand that her ears no longer rejoiced in the murmuring of love songs. After she had at last convinced him, however, they became and remained friends, although she was always a little scornful of his slight writings. A poem or piece of prose had to be based on some deep thought in order to attract her attention. She loved Boileau's hoarse voice, and encouraged him when he took up his pen to wage war on the feeble foolishness of hundreds of brainless scribes. She respected the satirist himself, liked his pale face with its burning eyes, and felt

happy in his company. Together they used to vituperate the vices which flourished around them like weeds.

The Duc de La Rochefoucauld, when his gout permitted him to leave his house in the Rue de Seine, used sometimes to mingle his voice with theirs, together with his brother Henri, Abbé de Marsillac, and Madame de La Fayette, whom Ninon used to compare with a countryside full of flowers and fruits.

Women, too, used to flock eagerly from all quarters of the capital to the Rue des Tournelles. It was there that the Marquise de Villette, a cousin of Madame de Maintenon, met Anne Morant, Marquise de Leuville, Villarceaux's aunt. The Maréchale de Créquy was a frequent visitor seeking news of Saint-Evremond, to whom she used to send money.

Occasionally, eccentrics like the Comtesse d'Olonne and the Duchesse de La Ferté, whose love affairs had swelled the columns of scandalous chronicles, but who had now finished their careers of gallantry, met at Ninon's house for the purpose of discussing love. They gave their hostess an excuse for formulating theories to justify their past conduct, for on that point Ninon never varied. She still considered love to be a purely sensual attraction, a blind sentiment which presupposed

no merit in the person who called it into being, and did not entail any obligations towards him. She distinguished between affection and desire, and believed in the possibility of promiscuous love.

Ninon had visitors, however, who did not approve of her. One of these was Catherine Pecquet, wife of Nicolas Ferdinand Olier, a woman of the bourgeois class who was both witty and kindhearted. She used to combat Ninon's theories and her baleful advice.

There were many others, however, who rejoiced to find in them absolution, as it were, of their own sins, and these were the more numerous.

"Women," wrote Madame de Coulanges, "are now running after Ninon as the other sex used formerly to run after her," and Madame de Sévigné adds, "Corbinelli sends me news of the marvellous fellowship of men he meets at Mademoiselle de Lanclos' house." So she gathered both sexes together in her old age, in spite of what Madame de Coulanges says. It would not have worried her, however, if she had had only women now, because she had certainly had men enough in the days of her prime. It was jealousy on the part of Madame de Coulanges and spite on the part of Madame de Sévigné, but both finished by making much of her. Madame de Coulanges became a visitor at the house in the Rue des Tournelles, and Madame de Sévigné

burned with envy. She was quite charmed that her son-in-law, the Marquis de Grignan, should be received there, and she used to send her most skilful news-gatherers to Ninon's house continually in order to discover her visitors' most secret thoughts. She forgot the harm that the courtesan had done her, and anxiously watched over her health. She softened the bitterness of her former epithets, and it became: "Our poor dear Lanclos." Her heart was once more full of forgiveness.

Ninon could not carry on her strenuous life as mistress of an open house without sometimes becoming fatigued. In fact, she was often quite exhausted by the exactions of so much friendliness. Some of her visitors enjoyed themselves so much at her house that they lost all notion of time, and far into the night would be still discussing questions on which they felt strongly. The scholars were the most inconsiderate of all, because they would never lose hope of making their hearers share their convictions. Ninon had usually to resort to strategy in order to inspire them with the desire to depart without hurting their feelings. Thus, of two long-winded ones who were discussing the costumes of the ancient Greeks, she enquired sweetly:

"At what hour, sirs, used the Lacedæmonians to go to bed?" The disputants laughed at her

amiable dismissal, made their excuses, thanked their hostess, and left her, quite enraptured with her.

Ninon used to give herself holidays occasionally, shutting her door and enjoying solitude and quiet; but she did not remain inactive. She kept up an active correspondence with her distant friends, who would be hurt if they thought they were being forgotten. During these periods of respite, moreover, she did not lose contact with the world, Many people sent her news, and through them she knew from day to day what the King was doing and whom he had dismissed, and, in fact, everything important or curious that was said or done at Court. The report in prose and verse of one of these secret pamphleteers, who was a friend of the Marquis de Dangeau, has been preserved for us. It relates the story of Louis XIV's journey to Chambard, the hunts and fêtes provided by Monsieur d'Erbaud for the King's entertainment, the amusements enjoyed by the Queens and their ladies at the castle of Blois. The narrator was guilty of an impertinence, for, in his desire to praise the luxury of Monsieur d'Erbaud, whose opulence evidently left him gaping, he decried Ninon's poor little house, in spite of all the splendours of the mind that shone there.

Ninon had another use for the holidays which she gave herself. Besides her large circle of worldly

friends, she possessed a little circle of more intimate friends, among whom Gourville held first rank. Gourville was now successful, rich and honoured. His embassies to Germany and Spain had filled his purse and earned him the King's gratitude, and people no longer remembered that he had once been hung in effigy for his peculations.

He was resting and administering without fatigue the property of the house of Condé, and he gave the most resplendent fêtes at his castle at Saint Maur. With Ninon he used to recall the figures of other days. They had seen many of their friends die around them. The Maréchal d'Albert, Molière and many others for whom their hearts felt sore had died, and they were left to console each other for their losses. They were like two old people who had lived to visit the tombs of their dead families.

Far away on the steps of the throne Ninon had another friendship which was kept up only in secret—that of Madame de Maintenon. The proud Marquise may have been ashamed to preserve this witness of her ancient shortcomings, but if so she hid the fact, and showed Ninon affection mixed with fear. To speak of Ninon before her would be to recall her origins and a thousand things which she wished to forget, especially her former libertinism, which she was now coming to

abhor more and more. In order, therefore, to be sure of Ninon's devotion and silence she is said to have offered her a home with herself; but Ninon realised the trap she was setting for her and that she intended to buy her silence in this way. She was not the sort of woman to accept such gilded servitude. She replied, therefore, that it was too late for her to learn the art of dissimulation.

According to Saint-Simon, the two women saw each other occasionally in great secrecy, but no information about these interviews has leaked out. Ninon maintained strict silence with regard to the Marquise, and when she departed from that attitude it was because there was some serious reason for doing so,[1] usually some generous motive. To any requests she ever made Madame de Maintenon replied by a prompt acquiescence. It looked almost as if she were in great haste to get the letter with its well-known big sprawling writing out of her sight. Ninon of course overlooked this scornful behaviour, which she knew to be provoked by her royal obligations and a fanatical piety.[2] But although she might be scorned in the "pantocrat's" apartment, she was eagerly welcomed elsewhere.

[1] The only time she is known to have broken her rule of silence was in reply to a direct question of Saint-Evremond's. (See p. 180.)

[2] Madame de Maintenon's family were on very friendly terms with Ninon, however, as her letters to Madame de Villette show.

At the Quai Malaquais, in a little house built by Mansart, gardened by Le Nôtre with monotonous beds of flowers, and decorated by Le Brun with allegorical paintings, Marie-Anne Mancini, Duchesse de Bouillon, lived and presided over the dissipations of a group of epicureans, while her husband diligently hunted stags in the forests of his domains with real or assumed indifference to her doings. This bright-eyed goddess with the tip-tilted nose used to show off her tiny feet and delicious shapely legs under abbreviated skirts. She soaked herself in La Fontaine's Gallic muse and fed herself on his stories. By nature she was gay, capricious and despotic, but at the same time attractive and subtle, and she ruled a little world of men and beasts all mixed up together. Lover succeeded lover in rapid succession, and the exile to a convent, which befell her for her sins from time to time, did not lead her to repent of them. Curious about all vices, even that which her friend Chapelle taught in the taverns, she used to lament that people treated her too respectfully. Gone were the days when Boisrobert was condemned to banishment for having sworn when he was losing at tric-trac with her; Chaulieu, Benserade, Segrais, Madame Deshoulières, Pradon and La Fare unburdened their bosoms of loads of prose and cynical rhymes at her house. She admired the smart impieties of

the Duc de Vivonne, the Duc de Vendôme's oaths, and his brother, the Grand Prior's, drunkenness. Sometimes at her own house and sometimes at the Temple, where these noblemen had established their kingdom of gallimantry, she led the dance of the gay scatterbrains who feasted on wine and love, with no thought of the aftermath.

One thing was lacking to her happiness, and that was Ninon's presence and support; she besought them ceaselessly, but obtained them rarely. Sometimes, however, when she had been especially importunate, Ninon did go to the Quai Malaquais, the Temple, or the Hôtel Boisboudrand, which was Chaulieu's abode. Everyone would try to be pleasant to her and to make her enjoy her visit by putting the choicest viands before her and showing her great deference, but she was not to be captivated, and would disentangle herself gently from the bonds with which they hoped to bind her. She refused to mix with people who did not know how to keep their conduct within bounds in all circumstances.

She preferred to this debauched circle the duller and eminently respectable circle which gathered round Mademoiselle de Scudéry at the corner of the Rue des Oiseaux. She used formerly to laugh at the humble *précieuse* as she drew up her sentimental geographies; but now she understood and sympathised with the vehement desire for love which

led the ugly and prudish old maid to construct her *Carte de Tendre.* She was truly sorry for her, and used to visit her in order to preserve the ties which united the old inhabitants of the Marais. She also admired her for the activity with which she fought for the emancipation of women; but she could take no pleasure in a circle which was void of philosophy and deaf to ideas, but loved indifferent poetry and childish pedagogy.

The invincible attraction of ideas led Ninon everywhere where she knew they existed. Not far from her own house, in the Place Royale, lived the Duchesse de la Feuillade, and by some mysterious agency the ardent mystic came in contact with the old courtesan, and they found they had a common meeting-ground.

Charlotte Gouffier, Duchesse de Roannes, was, before her marriage to the notorious libertine, La Feuillade, a Jansenist neophyte whom Pascal catechised and brought to the fold of Port Royal. But she was taken by force from the abbey where her soul remained purified by grace and penance. Ninon could still perceive in her traces of Pascal's austere training, and she listened entranced while the hostess told her story and brought to life the band of men and religious women who lived in the inspiration of the teachings of Jansenius and Saint Cyran. She could not accept their doctrines, but

she admired the pathetic faith which urged them on, giving them strength for the struggle and a contempt for persecution.

Madame de La Feuillade probably did not attempt to make Ninon a convert to Jansenism, which had been reduced to dust but still smouldered amongst its ruins. The Duchess at this time was old and unhappy and lived only on her memories, and she had few visitors. While they were talking intimately one afternoon they were interrupted, and Ninon was overcome with emotion at the sight of the newcomer. It was the Chevalier de Méré, her old lover—and still an old buck. He was passing through Paris and came to talk of the olden days when he used to preach the gospel of the open air to Pascal as they tramped the roads of Poitou. On what fascinating subjects the three talked in their reunion is not known, but when he returned to his house Méré wrote on his tablets, referring to Ninon: "Women who have been gallant never become narrow-minded." Mademoiselle de Lanclos never knew of this tribute, but a few days later she received a letter from the Chevalier which embodied the sense of it:

"I vow, Mademoiselle, that I was never more pleased at anything in my life than at meeting you the other day at the Duchesse de la Feuillade's house. It was one afternoon, if you remember,

when you two were alone together and I intruded upon you. You even seemed slightly annoyed at being interrupted in your engrossing conversation. I did not attempt to conceal my gratitude, however, for the pleasure it gave me to see and speak to you again, and I think it would show a lack of appreciation and civility on my part if I didn't tell you that I was a little hurt by your attitude. In fact, Mademoiselle, not to mince matters, you were not given so many rare qualities and such a lovable nature entirely for your own satisfaction. They were given to you to use for the joy and pleasure of deserving mankind. Decorum and decency have much to thank you for, I venture to assert, and there is no one in the world better able than I to know how wonderful you are. If only I had the wit to publish abroad your excellency, as I have to recognise it, I should attempt to enhance the exquisite sweetness of your reputation. When I saw you again the other day I fell anew under your spell, and especially appreciated the fact that even after such a long absence you seemed as charming to me as if I had never lost sight of you, and also that you did me the honour of permitting me to visit you as if I had never ceased to do so. I humbly thank you a thousand times, and I beg that you will remember and not be annoyed at my gratitude."

Ninon was certainly glad that her friendship with Madame de La Feuillade had permitted her to renew her acquaintance with this admirer whom she had loved in the days of his graceful youth, but she did not see much more of him. He went back to Poitou and vegetated there until his death.

As she advanced in age her relations with the world dropped off accordingly. Her sight became feeble and the spectacles she had to wear were unbecoming, She hated to let spiteful people have the chance of making a mock of her miserable little infirmities, so she stayed indoors as much as possible. Writing and meditation became her two favourite occupations.

CHAPTER X

NINON had sympathised with and encouraged Madame de La Sablière's love affair, and it seemed to her very fitting that the poor woman, who had been so badly treated by marriage, should find solace in free love. Madame de La Sablière had fallen suddenly in love with the Marquis de La Fare, and to Ninon he appeared to be just the man to bring joy into her friend's life, which had hitherto been so sad and bleak. He was handsome, intelligent and proud, and his gracious and courteous manner, together with his splendid military record, made him altogether irresistible. Ninon proclaimed herself charmed with him and was full of his praises. "The days when I see Monsieur de La Fare are my best days," she wrote, and she maintained that his high-toned poetry comforted her mind. But knowing from experience the duplicity of men, she warned Madame de La Sablière against too much abandonment. In her opinion the younger woman was being dangerously blinded by her passion, and she warned her that it would be better to enjoy his companionship quietly for a long time rather than to arouse in him an ardent passion

which would soon burn itself out. Madame de La Sablière, alas! would not listen to her, and Ninon saw what she had predicted actually happen. Monsieur de La Fare became friendly with Monsieur de Chaulieu and took to going pleasure-seeking with him. They joined with the people who gathered at the Temple in jeering at constancy in love. He also began to seek the company of other women and to spend his nights in gambling. Madame de La Sablière had become free through the death of her husband, and there was no longer anything to prevent her marrying her lover, or at least spending long happy days with him, but she had instead to reconcile herself to losing him. She fell into the depths of despair, and Ninon had to listen to the tale of her woes as well as to La Fare's.

"I have received a letter from Madame de La Sablière," she wrote. "The poor woman fills me with pity. I also see Monsieur de La Fare every day and, like the members of parliament, I never cease hearing the pros and cons . . . I am sorry for them. Conscience is a cruel gift from Heaven, and love causes more sorrow than joy in the long run. As far as I am concerned I need nothing these days but comfort, and I am entirely on the side of the woman who has earned my friendship and respect. I think that what is the matter with her is that she is too much alone."[1]

Madame de La Sablière made no attempt to struggle against the inevitable, and for the second time saw happiness flee from her. Ninon did not forsake her, and even seems to have felt a deeper sympathy for her than for any other woman of her acquaintance. She continued to be anxious about her, and, by surrounding her with attentions, sought to show her that life even without love might still hold attractions. In circumstances like these her goodness of heart was very apparent. She was a tactful comforter, and no appeal for help, from whatever quarter it came, ever found her ears deaf. At a later date the Marquis de Lassay, who had been married to a silly young girl, owed it to her advice that he was able to look upon his unhappy marriage with resignation.

Exquisite and marvellous Ninon! From whatever point of view her character is examined at this period of her life she is alike lovable. Madame de La Sablière, however, drifted away from her in spite of all she had done for her. She began, imperceptibly at first, to heed the denunciations of the Sévigné group, who inclined her to seek consolation in religion. They converted her, obtained her abjuration of her past misdeeds, and set her to work doing good deeds at the Hôpital des Incurables. At the new house in the Rue Neuve Saint Honoré almost the only visitor from

her past life was the absent-minded La Fontaine. Ninon, meeting him there, sought in vain to fix the old fabulist's attention. He would seem to listen to her, then his mind would wander again and she had to leave him, saddened to see how the mind which had once been so full of the most delicious poetry had become enfeebled with age. Madame de La Sablière had been attacked by a terrible illness and Ninon's thoughts dwelt much upon her. Writing towards the end of 1692 to Monsieur de Bonrepaus she said :

" How I wish that Madame de Sablière would come back to her own home. Her time would pass just as pleasantly in her own room at the Feuillants' as at the Incurables."

Ninon and Monsieur de Bonrepaus were endlessly concerned about their mutual friend. Bonrepaus, thanks to his talent for administration, had become a great personage in the realm, and in 1683 the King had given him the post of Comptroller of justice, police and finances for the Navy and the Marines. He had been useful to Ninon many times in bettering the lot of her son, Louis-François de Mornay, who had now reached the rank of captain of a frigate, and her gratitude and affection for him became ever greater. They came together as often as their leisure permitted them, and enjoyed dining at each other's houses. Ninon was inclined to be jealous

of her former swain and used to scold him if he dared to pass through the Marais without calling upon her, or lingered in Madame de Scudéry's house and forgot her. She herself neglected no opportunity of doing anything to please him, and when she could not see him she wrote to him. Colbert's death gave her an opportunity of pouring forth gentle phrases of comfort, because Bonrepaus was greatly distressed by the death of his patron; and when Bonrepaus was absent from Paris she sent him a copious gazette of news, writing to him sometimes in England and sometimes in Holland, where he was engaged on diplomatic missions. In 1692, when he was at La Hogue preparing for the naval battle which Tourville was to fight against the English, Ninon again showed her solicitude by writing to him, but there is no further trace of their friendly correspondence after this date.[1] Bonrepaus, unused to the fogs of Denmark, fell ill and must have broken off the correspondence which Ninon, also old and ill, was never able to resume.

As year succeeded year the charming old lady's strength failed more and more. One of her letters proves, however, that she was still consenting to receive anyone who sought her help and advice.

"My first action this morning," she said to an

[1] See V. D. de Boislisle, *Monsieur de Bonrepaus, la Marine et le désastre de La Hougue*, 1877.

unknown correspondent, "was to go and hunt for that book for you at the top of the house. That was a good beginning to the day. Some people would say that I should not have thought of doing so, but it seems to me that we were not very kind to each other yesterday, and I have been reproaching myself on that account. I do not like friendships which begin with a rush and drop off as quickly."

Ninon had to spare herself, however, and the time soon came when she could no longer receive any but a very small circle of friends. Several young men, whose conversation was stimulating, were still admitted. They included the Abbé Dubois, future minister to the Regent, the learned Abbé Gedoyn, the academician and diplomat, Simon de La Loubère, who had just returned from his journey to Siam, the sarcastic Abbé de Troisville, the Abbé de Hautefeuille, librarian to the Duchesse de Bouillon, and Philippe de Clérembault, lieutenant-general of the royal armies, whom Ninon welcomed for the sake of his deceased father, the Comte de Palluau, a fact of which the officer was quite aware.

"Monsieur de Clérembault," wrote Ninon, "often asks me if he resembles his father in intelligence. 'No,' I reply, but I hope that his self-conceit is so great that he will think I mean it

as a compliment, and there may be other people who think so too. What a different age this is to that in which we lived!"

Ninon was sufficiently interested in him, however, to occupy herself with his affairs, and from a letter of Clérembault's, addressed to a certain abbot of loose morality, it appears that she even arranged for him to interview a lady at her house, with matrimonial intentions.

"I am very grateful to Mademoiselle de Lanclos," he wrote. "I think she is sufficiently my friend not to have given an impression of me that I cannot live up to, and it comforts me to think that the first interview will take place in her presence. I am hoping that her presence will lend me courage, without either she herself or my judges perceiving it. You may be sure it will be a great advantage to me to have behind me the intellectual support of a person whose vivacity and good sense never fail, because I myself, as you know, am not always guided by tact. I shall be delighted to hear news of you, and you would be doing me a favour if you would send me news of Mademoiselle de Lanclos, who has no friend who takes a livelier interest in what concerns her than I do."

The tone of this letter shows in what veneration Ninon was held by Clérembault and many other

eminent persons of the time, who were in a position to enjoy livelier pleasures, had they liked, than those afforded by the Rue des Tournelles. She now stayed permanently by her own fireside, declaring that she would change no more either place or friends. The members of her circle were all jealous of Saint-Evremond, who was always held up to them as a model of fidelity, and her friends reproached her for letting her eyes and heart turn too frequently towards England, where he was.

No one, however, was a better tonic for her mind than Saint-Evremond. She had revived her correspondence with him, which had been suspended for a time, and it was with the utmost eagerness that she awaited the arrival of couriers from across the Channel.

"I was all alone in my room and very tired of reading," she wrote, "when they said to me, 'Here is a man with a message from Monsieur de Saint-Evremond.' You may be sure all my weariness left me in a moment." "I defy Dulcinea," she added elsewhere, "to look back upon the memory of her knight with more joy than I do." Saint-Evremond had lost none of his optimism, his verve or his libertinism. He still lived in London, where he was on terms of intimacy with Hortense Mancini, an ardent, passionate woman who had escaped from the control of her husband, the Duc de Mazarin.

Saint-Evremond drew a pension from Charles II, and lived contentedly in modest style. With the exceptions of conversation and writing, his only pleasure was good food.

"I eat oysters every day," he acknowledged, "I also dine well and sup not too badly. Men have become heroes who had less merit than I." Later he summed up the way he passed his days and the state of his mind as follows:

(16) *Passer quelques heures à lire*
Est mon plus doux amusement.
Je me fais un plaisir d'écrire
Et non pas un attachment.
Je perds le gout de la satire;
L'art de louer malignement
Cède au secret de powoir dire
Des vérités obligeamment.
Je vis éloigné de la France.
Sans bésoin et sans abondance,
Content d'un vulgaire destin.
J'aime la vertu sans rudesse,
J'aime le plaiser sans mollesse . . ;
J'aime le vie et n'en crains pas la fin.

Saint-Evremond's preoccupation with his own well-being, however, did not make him neglect his friends, especially Ninon, who was the most cherished. Everyone who visited London took back to the lady of the Rue des Tournelles letters full of philosophical reflections and affectionate messages. Bonrepaus, the Abbé Dubois, and many others were his messengers in turn, whilst Madame de

Mazarin also helped the two correspondents through the agency of the Abbé d'Hautefeuille and others. Ninon still kept an eye on her friend's material interests, and looked after his money matters. They showered presents on each other. Saint-Evremond sent tea to Ninon, and she sent him wine chosen by Gourville, the epicure. They missed each other's company, but they had not the courage to quit their tranquil homes and go adventuring in order to see each other.

"I should have liked," wrote Ninon, "to have passed what remains of my life with you, and if you had felt as I do you would have been here . . . old friends have charms that one never recognises until one is deprived of them." At another time she wrote, "I envy everyone who goes to England, because I should love to dine with you once more. How terribly vulgar to long for a dinner! The mind may have other great advantages over the body, but the body has its own little appetites which are for ever returning, and serve to distract the mind from its sad thoughts. You often used to laugh at my melancholic vein, but I have banished all that. There is no time for melancholy when one is in the last lap of life. One should live each day for itself and be content with it. Near-by hopes, whatever you may say about them, are worth as much as far distant future ones, and are more sure

of being realised. Here is the moral of all this for you—To keep well should be the true end of man."

For twenty years these two had helped each other to find life worth living, and now Ninon was discovering that she could no longer contemplate her increasing decrepitude with equanimity. It hurt her terribly to hear people talking in vaguely flattering tones about her "distinguished merit," instead of the whole-hearted compliments of other days.

"They use this fine term to try to console me for what I have lost," she wrote sadly.

The Duc de Rochefoucauld said to her one day shortly before he died: "Old age is a woman's hell," and the aphorism made a great impression upon her. She repeated it to Saint-Evremond, and he tried to reassure her:

"You are more spiritual and intelligent than the young and lively Ninon," and the better to calm her apprehensions he added: "Your life, my very dear one, has been too brilliant for it not to continue so to the end. So do not let the purgatory of which Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld speaks frighten you. He was only trying to work off a well-premeditated maxim. Pronounce the word 'love' boldly, therefore, and never let 'old' cross your lips. . . . What ingratitude to be ashamed to name love when you owe all your

charms and graces to it. . . . Be frank about your passions, and your virtues will be the more appreciated. . . . You were born to love all your life. Lovers and gamesters have something in common. Once a lover always a lover. If people had told me that you had turned religious I should have been quite able to believe it, because that is only changing human passion for the love of God, which still provides occupation for the heart. But not to love at all is a state of vacuity which would not at all suit your heart."

Thus reprimanded, Ninon was reassured. She looked at herself in the mirror and had to acknowledge that her enfeebled eyes still retained enough of their brightness, and that her still healthy teeth gave charm to her smile, and as for the wrinkles, she determined to accept them gracefully, such at least as she could not conceal.

"I believe, like you, that wrinkles are a sign of wisdom," she wrote.

Saint-Evremond did his best at this time by flattery and many subtle arguments on the doctrines of Epicurus to keep Ninon in the paths of materialism, but he could not fail to observe that she was slipping away from them. He knew that it was only bluff on her part when she wrote to him to consider his stomach alone. He sent the Duke of Saint Albans, a natural son of Charles II, to her

to be enlightened as to the ways of the world, and remarked to her on the lad's fine physical appearance, but she retorted:

"What do you mean by thinking that the contemplation of a young man could give me pleasure now?" And again: "My body, to tell the truth, is no longer worth considering, but my mind has still some glimmerings of life to sustain it."

To which Saint-Evremond replied:

"When I was young I used only to admire the mind and cared less for the affairs of the body than I should have done. Now I am repairing the wrong I did as well as I can, both by the use I make of my body and by the respect and affection I feel for it. In your case it was different. Your body counted for something to you in your youth, and now you are only occupied with what concerns the mind. I don't know, however, whether you are right to respect the mind so highly. One reads hardly anything that is worth the trouble of remembering, one says hardly anything that deserves to be listened to. But however enfeebled by age the senses may be, they still respond quite appreciably to whatever they come in contact with, and it would be wrong to try to mortify them. It may be that the mind is jealous of them because it thinks they have the better part.

"Monsieur Bernier, the prettiest philosopher

that I have ever known (and I mean the adjective literally as well because it suits his face, figure, manners and conversation), was speaking about the mortification of the senses to me one day, and he said:

"'I am going to tell you a secret that I would not tell Madame de La Sablière or even Mademoiselle de Lanclos, whom I consider to be her superior. I solemnly assert, for your ear alone, that to abstain from pleasure appears to me to be committing a sin.'

"I was surprised at the novelty of the idea, and you may be sure it made an impression upon me. If he had continued his discourse I might have come to appreciate his teaching."

This sort of graceful argument could no longer convince Ninon. She still enjoyed her small gaieties, and liked to be made famous throughout England by Saint-Evremond, the Marquis de Ruvigny and the Duc de Tallard, the French Ambassador, all of whom were singing her praises in London. She was delighted, too, when this fame procured her the visits and affection of the Duchess of Sandwich[1] and the famous doctor, Jean-Alphonse Turretini, but in truth she was now only attached to worldly interests by the merest thread. Her soul was full

[1] The Duchess of Sandwich was the daughter of the Earl of Rochester and was very well known in France. According to the Marquis d'Argenson and the Duc de Luynes, she came to Paris in 1698 with her physician Morelli. She met Ninon and was delighted with her. They struck up a firm friendship

of melancholy and she had to fight hard against disillusionment. It seemed to her that she was always writing the epitaphs of friends.

"I am tired sometimes," she wrote, "of always doing the same things, and I even admire the Swiss who threw himself into the river for that very reason. My friends often scold me for talking like this, and try to reassure me by telling me that life is good as long as one is happy and the mind is healthy. It is all very well for people whose bodies are still strong to talk like that, but I would prefer a healthy body to a healthy mind. But what is the use of thinking about it all when one can change nothing? Better not to think at all when one's thoughts can lead to nothing."

Saint-Evremond was alarmed at her despondent state, and did all he could to inculcate in her the optimism of which he was so full.

and the Duchess corresponded assiduously with Ninon after her return to England. Ninon's portrait by Ferdinand Elle was in her possession. Saint-Evremond sent Turretini to visit Ninon. In a letter to a relation the young doctor wrote as follows: "I have had news of Monsieur du Boulay through an old lady of his acquaintance to whom Monsieur de Saint-Evremond gave me an introduction. She is called Mademoiselle de Lenclos and is very clever. Many distinguished people visit her daily. I go to see her occasionally and have met the Abbé de Châteauneuf there amongst others. . . At the same house I made the acquaintance of the charming Monsieur de Fontenelle, author of the *Dialogues des morts*, and of Monsieur de La Loubère, the new academician."

"Your letter," she replied to him, "has filled me with vain desires of which I no longer believed myself capable. The days pass in idleness and ignorance, as our friend Des Yveteaux used to say, and time is destroying us and taking from us everything we enjoy. You used to say that I would die of over-thinking, but here I am, trying to think of nothing and forgetting to-morrow what I did to-day. Everyone tells me that I have really less cause to grumble at time than other people have. That may be so, but if anyone had told me what sort of life I should come to lead I would have hanged myself."

This state of despair was probably directly due to the loss of almost all her dearest friends, and there is nothing to suggest that remorse for her past life had anything to do with it. Elbène had died in poverty in a hospital. De Gourville and Madame de La Sablière were also dead, but it was the death of Charleval which disturbed her serenity most grievously. "Such a loss is worse than dying oneself," she cried when she heard of it. Her own state of health was also becoming precarious. She felt very weak, could no longer take solid nourishment, and did not obtain any relief from remedies. "How unhappy I am," she kept on repeating; yet there was nothing in particular to trouble her except the deaths of her friends, which were

inevitable. Her son was now the captain of a ship and was comfortably off at Toulon, where he resided. Villarceaux had legitimatised him before he, too, shuffled off this mortal coil, and had also bequeathed to him an income which the Marquise made no trouble about paying to him.

What Ninon really suffered from was anxiety about the hereafter. Montaigne's philosophy had sufficed for her needs for many a long year, but in the long run it was failing her, or at least failing to give her peace of mind. At this crisis she was fortunate enough to discover traces of an older philosophy, that of Seneca, running through the unhelpful doctrines of scepticism. Montaigne, moreover, made no secret of his admiration for the stoic moralist.

" He stimulates the mind and warms the heart," he said of him, and acknowledged that he made use of parts of his works as well as of Plutarch's. " My book is built out of their ruins."

Perhaps Montaigne's veneration may have determined Ninon to seek in ancient philosophy the comfort which she could no longer derive from the modern, or the scholars who surrounded her in her affliction may have urged her to listen to the words of a master who was supreme in the art of bringing comfort to souls in distress. At any rate, she was soon plunging with delight into the works

of the stoic philosopher. To be sure she met many condemnations of her past mode of life and the severest censure of the epicureans, whose self-indulgent doctrines she had followed for such a long time. But when Seneca exalted the laws of Nature and tried to adapt the lives of his disciples to them Ninon found herself in agreement with him. She also approved when he censured the wickedness of this world with an eloquence which carried her away. His deep admiration for charity and loyalty in friendship charmed her, and at last she came to, and lingered among, the pages in which he exalted resignation to grief and misfortune.

In the glow of discovery she could not help communicating her joy to her friends. Saint-Evremond replied to her effusiveness with rancour.

"You are finding charms in Seneca that he is not usually credited with." The old debauchee remembered and resented the treatise *On Benefactions,* in which Seneca described men of his temperament as "philosophers of the table who look upon virtue as the handmaiden of pleasure," and *Concerning the Happy Life,* in which he denounced them as worthless fellows. He therefore looked upon him as narrow-minded.

"When I read his writing I always disagree with what he says, and with the opinions he is trying

to impose upon his readers. When he preaches the doctrine of poverty, I long for riches. His ideal of virtue is terrifying, and after its contemplation even the least dissipated of people would abandon themselves to pleasure. Finally he talks so much about death and fills me with such dark forebodings that I do all I possibly can not to remember anything of his that I have read."

Ninon did not like such talk, because she perceived that it came from a man who was determined in spite of his age to persist in the paths of dalliance. It was precisely the vindication of death with all its gloom that attracted her in the *Consolations to Marcia*, and the *Letters to Lucilius*, which preached the acceptance of human destiny without vain repining, were far from disconcerting her, but rather stimulated her courage and soothed her spirit.

"To be no more and never to have been, are they not the same thing?" asked the moralist. "Neither state rests with man to choose. He is put into the world for a limited time; if yours were the choice, to what age would you extend life? Why these tears and repinings? They are in vain. . . . Everything is predestined without appeal, and our life is governed by all-powerful and inexorable Fate. You too will go the way of all things. . . . There is no road that does not come to an end at last. . . ."

When Ninon was young she had steeped herself in the philosophy of Epicurus and Montaigne, and now that she was old she studied Seneca with equal fervour. From being a sceptic and a libertine she became a stoic. When she finally grasped fully the gospel of resignation taught by her new master she found her outlook upon life changed, and all her doubts quietened. Seneca's teaching agreed with Christianity on many points. He believed in God, and desired to mould himself upon Him and reflect His infinite perfection.

"I do not obey God, but I am part of His will; it is through devotion, not necessity, that I follow Him. . . . Let us not complain against the divine author of all life, but let us rather walk in His ways. . . . To attain nobility of soul it is necessary to be in submission to God."

Ninon read such remarks with deep emotion, but it cost her some pangs to adopt the spirit of them. She remembered Saint-Evremond's ironical words:

"Religion is the last of our loves, and although we may imagine that we are only concerned with the happiness of the world to come, we are in reality searching for new delights in this."[1]

[1] Saint-Evremond wrote to Ninon to tell her of the conversion of the Comte de Gramont when he was *in extremis*: "Hitherto I have been content to be an honourable man, but now I see that something more is expected of me, and I only await your example to become religious."

There was no religious devotion in Ninon's soul, however, but only hope. How wonderful it would be, she thought, if the immortality of the soul, which she had so long denied, should permit her to find again, in another world, the friends she had lost in this! In 1703 she heard of Saint-Evremond's death with inexpressible sorrow, and it seemed impossible to her that such a delightful being should suffer complete extinction.

By this time Ninon was no more than a pale ghost of her former self, a sort of living wraith, endowed with movement and speech, but living an ethereal existence. Led gradually thither by stoicism and her natural bent, she became absorbed in the contemplation of the unknown into which she knew she must soon vanish. Her philosophical speculations led her to formulate the image of an inexorable judge of mankind, but from the murmurs of her distant past she singled out, and listened to, the voices of her infancy, and substituted the image of that living Christ whose mysterious attraction she had formerly sought to discover in company with Madame de La Suze. Like the Magdalene, she had in her youth followed him with admiration, knowing that His words were divine, if not His birth. It may, therefore, have been the prospect of listening to His parabolic eloquence beyond the tomb that unconsciously inclined her towards

religion, or perhaps it was the example set by other notorious unbelievers, who, like the Duchesse de La Ferté, had become converted.

As soon as her change of heart became known, monks and abbots overwhelmed her with their ministrations, well knowing what a triumph it would be to the one who converted her. Fontenelle, one of her last surviving friends, would have preferred her to remain in her old sinful ways, and she said to him:

"You know what a fortune I could formerly have made by selling my body. I could do even better now by selling my soul: the Jesuits and Jansenists are fighting for it."

The Père d'Orléans, a disciple of Loyola's, was amongst those who tormented her, but she resisted him. The childish articles of faith he wished her to accept revolted her intelligence and it was impossible for her to accept them blindly as the faithful did.

"Very well," he cried, when he had exhausted all his arguments, "but while you are waiting to be convinced, offer up your incredulity to God."

The Abbé Testu was another who had an attempt at this difficult conversion. Unfortunately he lacked breath for controversy, and wrote love lyrics more easily than sermons. Ninon knew that he would ask for a mitre in exchange for her conversion, and she had no intention of making a prince of the

Church out of this gay degenerate. She sent him back covered with confusion to his gallantry and paternosters.

In the midst of all this the Abbé de Châteauneuf presented his godson to her, François-Marie Arouet, son of the notary Arouet who looked after her private business. He was a charming, pleasant and wide-awake boy of twelve years, who gazed at her out of deep-set eyes. She liked his conversation, which had none of the simplicity of childhood, and she appreciated his facility in writing light verse. When she prophesied a great future for him, however, she could have no possible idea of the sort of Antichrist he was to become under the pseudonym of Voltaire, and how he was to be hated by the entire Catholic Church.

The child, with the directness due to his age and character, felt no admiration for her at all. He was equally repelled by "her face bearing the most hideous traces of old age" and her mind teeming with "the maxims of an austere philosophy." Ninon, therefore, and the most direct heir of her libertinism, were not warned of their spiritual relationship by any obscure instinct. At this time Ninon had only a few more months to live. She was ailing, but in possession of her faculties. She had settled all her financial matters and her son's future was definitely assured. She had, therefore, nothing

more to worry about but her own fate. Eager to escape from her moral solitude, she came of her own accord to religion, seeking in it relief from the anxiety which still tormented her. She surrounded herself with pious pictures and called Père Brunet, the parish priest, to her bedside. A nun watched over her agitated nights, and she entrusted her with the task of providing a decent burial for her after death.

When the fatal moment seemed imminent she made out her will with a hand that had not lost its firmness. In this document she left sums of money to her servants, Pierre and Marie Poron, a brother and sister who acted as her valet and chambermaid. Catherine and Marguerite also received legacies, and to the poorer members of her family on the Raconis side she left mourning attire. The Abbé de Trianon-Lagrange was offered her lien of 16,000 *livres* on the gabels, with the request that he would use them according to her instructions. In memory of her old friendship with Gourville she bequeathed her house in the Rue des Tournelles to his nephew; and lastly, in recognition of Arouet's discretion and consideration, she begged him to accept the charge of executor to her will and a thousand *francs* with which his son might buy books.

Having thus made her last depositions Ninon prepared quietly for death, and when she felt that

the end was near had herself taken to the Church of Saint Paul, where she made general confession of her sins and received absolution for them. Mesdames de Vaubecourt, de Nancrée and Ollier watched over her, and before she expired she received Extreme Unction. She was then at peace, knowing that the priests would say masses at her expense for the ultimate repose of her soul. She died as she had lived, sweetly and calmly, on the 17th October, 1705, after three days of suffering, aged eighty-five years.

Dangeau, Sourches and many other chroniclers immediately hailed her death as an event, and hardly had she been buried in the Church of Saint Paul ere the Abbé de Châteauneuf composed her epitaph and began to create the legend of her complete irreligiousness :

(17) *Il n'est rien que la mort ne dompte.*
Ninon qui, près d'un siècle, a servi les amours
Vient enfin de finir ses jours
Elle fut de son siècle, et l'honneur et la honte.
Inconstante dans ses désirs,
Délicate dans ses plaisirs,
Pour ses amis, fidèle et sage,
Pour ses amours, tendre et volage,
Elle fit régner dans son coeur
Et l'extrême débauche, et l'extrême pudeur,
Et montra ce que peut ce triomphant mélange,
Des charmes de Vénus et de l'esprit d'un ange.

* * * * *

A la vie elle eut grande foi,
Pour rien mettre à l'aventure
Elle ne crut point la future.

NINON DE LANCLOS

No woman ever received so much notice from so many illustrious pens as did Ninon de Lanclos. The poets Terrasson, Desmahis, La Harpe, Dorat, Piis and even a Slavonic writer, Count Schouvalow, poured forth their eulogies in a flood of letters, epigrams, quatrains and distiches. D'Alembert and Rousseau, the philosophers, paid visits of respect to her tomb. Voltaire and an army of unscrupulous biographers after him piled up absurd stories about her, which unfortunately obscured her prestige.[1] She should not be judged simply as a courtesan. Walpole called her Our Lady of Love, and thereby showed how little he understood her. He praised her physical attractions and the beauties of her perishable form, but forgot the depth and beauty of her mind.

La Bruyère understood her better, but still incompletely. Talking of her he said:

"A beautiful woman who has all the good

[1] According to D'Argenson (*Memoires*, VII.), Queen Maria Leckzinska took possession of Ninon's skull. "She used often to go and look at the beautiful darling. It was a death's head and she said that it was Ninon de Lanclos's. Some of the ladies of the court, who pretended to be very devout, had skulls like this. They used to decorate them with ribbons and head-dresses, light them up with little lamps and meditate before them." There appears to be no foundation for this anecdote. Ninon was buried on the 18th October, 1705, in the Church of Saint Paul, in the presence of Gourville's nephew and the notary Arouet.

qualities of a man is the most wonderful thing in the world. In her are found all the best points of both sexes."

It is in two phrases of one of Ninon's own letters that the secret of her fascination is to be found:

"Philosophy goes well with the graces of the mind. It is not enough to be wise: one must be charming as well."

TRANSLATION OF POETRY IN TEXT

CHAPTER IV.

(1) *page* 78.

The frailty of the tie between Monsieur and Madame Coulon is well known. D'Emery makes a cuckold of the husband, who tells it all to Ninon.

(2) *page* 79.

It is not to be wondered at that Coulon loves the beautiful Ninon, because he is entitled to reprisals.

(3) *page* 86.

Oh, beautiful and charming Ninon, no one can refuse you whatever you may ask, so great is the power wielded by a young woman who owns beauty as well as wit. Alas! at this beginning of another new year I have nothing good and beautiful enough with which to fashion you a gift. Deign therefore to accept my good wishes. . . . I wish for Ninon a husband who will not be bad-tempered but handsome and kind, plenty of meat in Lent, good Spanish wines, fat chestnuts and a great deal of money, for without that a person is miserable and hampered, and finally I wish that the whole world may respect her as much as does Scarron.

(4) *page* 87.

Never start a quarrel lest it go too far. Try not to hurt too deeply, and see that the glances from your eyes do not make so many victims.

CHAPTER V.

(5) *page* 117.

You are unworthy of my love, unworthy of my tears, and I find it easy to resist your feeble charms. My love lent you attractions, unkind one, which were not really yours.

(6) *page* 118.

I am indifferent to your love, and care not for your tears, and I see that you are able to withstand my mild attractions. But if Love lends charm, why do you not borrow some?

(7) *page* 119.

You must fall in with this plan which is sanctioned by love. If you try to resist it will be in vain, Madame la Marquise, for Bussy-Rabutin never lets go his prize. . . . That is not the way to become canonised, but who wants to be a saint who is vowed to the Church. You must fall in with this plan which is sanctioned by love.

CHAPTER VI.

(8) *page* 134.

Since adorable Ninon wishes me to sing in Lent, I cannot say her no. Would to God that she would say the same!

CHAPTER VII.

(9) *page* 142.

For pity's sake, take me to see her; I long to see the beautiful creature; whether it be for my good or harm, I shall die if I do not know her, etc.

(10) *page* 161.

Who, even if he had seven buckets full of gold, and thirty purses of silver, would empty them in three weeks.

(11) *page* 163.

Dear Philis, what has become of you? Is this enchanter who has held you for the last three years by some unknown spell keeping you shut up in some old castle?

CHAPTER VIII.

(12) *page* 183.

All the striplings come to school with me for their salvation. I am trying to save Duras, Dangeau and Briole. Truly that is my only object. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.* I am a reformed character. I really am.

(13) *page* 184.

To take part in the King's pleasures, gaming, balls and the chase, exercising in fine array, occasionally mounting the slopes of Parnassus, being very ambitious, flirting with ladies dark and fair, forgetting all religion when self-interest is in question, being head of a regiment, buying a governorship, being terribly optimistic, such are the mighty hasards by which you, Dangeau, will become a marshal of France, if the peace only lasts another ten years.

(14) *page* 186.

To understand how meritorious she was, know that she was held in esteem by Lanclos.

(15) *page* 187.

Damon, let us judge with our own eyes of those delightful gardens in which art improves upon nature. The coldness of your verse does more harm to their verdure than the severest of winters.

CHAPTER X.

(16) *page* 264.

My favourite occupation is spending hours at a time in reading. I make a pleasure and not a burden of writing. I have lost my liking for satire, the art of praising with intent to hurt has yielded place to the secret of being able to tell the truth kindly. I live an exile from France, neither in need nor in plenty, content with a commonplace existence. I like virtue without austerity and pleasure without effeminacy. . . . I love life, but I do not fear its end.

(17) *page* 280.

There is nothing that death does not conquer. Ninon, who for nearly a century has been the handmaiden of love, has at last reached the end of her days. She was both the honour and the shame of her century. Inconstant in love and particular in her pleasures, she was loyal and decorous to her friends and tender and fickle to her lovers. In her heart reigned both extremes of debauchery and modesty, and she showed how powerful could be the union of the charms of a Venus with the mind of an angel. . . . She had great faith in life, but would trust nothing to chance, and did not believe in the future.

PORTRAITS OF NINON DE LANCLOS

There are seven portraits of Ninon in existence at the present moment.

1. An anonymous painting in the Musée de Bruxelles. This portrait is attributed to Pierre Mignard. It answers to the description of Ninon as described by various writers, but it is doubtful whether Mignard really painted it. It has never been engraved.

2. An anonymous painting in the Musée de Versailles. This portrait was bought in 1907 from the Comte de Rehbinder. It bears no resemblance to the previous one. The name Ninon de Lanclos is inscribed on the left side of the canvas. Masquelier, who engraved it, attributes it to Raoux, and adds that the portrait was offered by Ninon to her friend, Lady Sandwich, and passed from her into the hands of Madame de Graffigny, and then into the possession of the Abbé de la Roche. On the other hand, all the eighteenth-century engravers who have, like Masquelier, engraved this work (Daumont, G. F. Schmidt, Pinssio, Lainé, M. Aubert, Syfang, S. M. Bernigeroth, Dambrun, J. B. Compagnie, etc.) attributed it to Ferdinand. Probably, therefore, it was painted by Louis Ier. Elle, called Ferdinand, the eldest son of Ferdinand Elle.

3. An anonymous pastel preserved in the Château de Villarceaux. This portrait is very similar to the preceding one, but the face is more babyish and less elongated, the eyes are larger and the mouth is less attractive. The hair is exactly similar, and the shoulder strap is not fastened with a jewel. There are also differences in the draperies. This curious work appears to be an old copy of the original by Ferdinand.

4. An enamel at the Musée du Louvre. This enamel, which is painted in imitation of Jean Petitot, has for a long time been considered to be a portrait of Ninon, and has been reproduced as such by engravers and lithographers (Deveria,

Coupé, Tavernier, Garnier, Delpech, etc.) during the whole of the nineteenth century. Seroni in particular describes it as such in *Les Emaux De Petitot Au Musée Impérial du Louvre*, 1862. It was, as a matter of fact, executed by an unknown artist after the original painting of Vandyck that W. Hollar engraved in 1646 and J. Morin at a later date, and it represents, according to these engravers, Marguerite Lémon, an Englishwoman.

5. An anonymous enamel in Sir Tollemache Sinclair's collection. This enamel is a copy of the enamel in the Musée du Louvre.

6. An anonymous painting in Lord Spencer's collection at Althorp. This canvas is a portrait of a woman who bears no resemblance to Ninon.

7. An anonymous painting in the Musée de Marseilles. This canvas, formally attributed to Mignard, is not now considered to be his work, but to anyone who knows Mignard's style it would appear to resemble his work more closely than the portrait at Bruxelles, which bears little resemblance to his usual style. Mignard was certainly a friend of Ninon's, but he only knew her when she had reached a mature age. The portrait at Marseilles represents an old woman, whilst the one at Bruxelles is a portrait of a young one. The features of the women in the two portraits appear to be identical, and there seems to be no doubt that they represent Ninon's true appearance at the two extremes of her life.

PORTRAIT OF MADAME SCARRON, AFTERWARDS MADAME DE MAINTENON

An anonymous painting preserved at the Château de Villarceaux. Much has been written about this portrait, but it has never hitherto been reproduced. La Beaumelle, in his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Madame de Maintenon,* 1755, described it for the first time as follows :—

"The Marquis (de Villarceaux) was annoyed because Madame Scarron continued to avoid him, and determined to have a portrait of her to console himself. He painted her in profile, coming out of the bath, holding a sponge in her left hand, while her right hand grasps a towel, which is in the act of falling, and is held only by a ribbon fastened with a diamond. The robe has fallen and her left arm and ivory shoulder are exposed to the passionate glances of an ugly little brown imp, who holds a mirror in which are reflected the features of the beauty, who is covered with confusion at being surprised."

La Beaumelle, according to Taphanel, does not appear to have written his description in the presence of the original picture, but most likely described it from the accounts of the nuns of Saint-Cyr. Hence there are errors of detail in his description which are due partly to his fertile imagination and partly to wilful misinformation on the part of the nuns. It is highly improbable, for example, that Villarceaux, who was a skilful painter, would have entrusted the task of painting his unkind mistress to a third person. He painted the portrait himself, and painted it, moreover, from imagination.

The existence of the canvas described by La Beaumelle has never been disputed. The nuns of Saint-Cyr themselves confirmed the fact of its existence, and there is quoted in

Taphanel's works the following letter addressed by Madame de Louvigny, one of the nuns, to Madame de Maintenon's first biographer :—

" The portrait of her coming out of a bath has been bought by the Reverend Mother at a sale at Versailles, because she was indignant at what she heard about this portrait, and so bought it in order to keep it out of the hands of ill-disposed persons."

The same nun added in a later letter that the Ladies of Saint-Cyr had had decent draperies painted to cover her beautiful body and had hidden the portrait in an obscure corner of the convent.

The canvas therefore left the Château de Villarceaux at the death of the Marquis, or of his son, Charles de Mornay. It returned in the following manner. The Reverend Mother of Saint Cyr, of whom Madame de Louvigny spoke was Madame de Mornay, a relation of the Villarceaux. Out of respect for Madame de Maintenon she must have told a pious untruth, and, far from employing a painter to cover Madame Scarron's nudity with decent drapery and hiding her in an obscure corner of the convent, she took it upon herself to send Villarceaux's portrait to the family château. It is still there in the tower which is called Ninon's tower, and is to be found inset in the woodwork on the left wall of the antechamber on the first floor. It cannot be moved, and the smallness and darkness of the room makes it extremely difficult to photograph. The ugly little brown imp mentioned by La Beaumelle is in the darkest corner of the canvas. At Madame Scarron's feet is a little dog which was overlooked by La Beaumelle in his description.

This portrait of Madame Scarron painted from imagination bears a striking resemblance to Mignard's portrait painted towards the end of the seventeenth century.

WORKS OF NINON DE LANCLOS

PROSE

1. *La Coquette vengée*, Paris, Charles de Sercy, 1659, in-12. *Dilto*, S. L. N. D. (Paris, Claude Prudhomme, 1701, in-12) included in *Portrait ou le Véritable caractère de la coquette*, Paris, Claude Prudhomme, 1701, in-12.

2. *Portrait d'un inconnu*, in *Recueil des pièces en prose les plus agréables de ce temps. Composées par divers auteurs. Quatriesme partie.* Paris, Ch. de Sercy, 1661, pp. 326 etc.

3. AUTHENTIC CORRESPONDENCE.—*Lettres de Mmes de Villars, de Coulanges et de la Fayette, de Ninon de Lanclos et de Mlle Aïssé, accompagnées de notices biographiques, de notes explicatives et de "la Coquette vengée" par Ninon de Lanclos.* Paris, Léopold Collin, an XIII., 2 vol. in-12.

Lettres de Mmes de Villars, de la Fayette, de Tencin, de Coulanges, de Ninon de Lanclos et de Mlle Aïsse accompagnées de notices biographiques, de notes explicatives et de la "Coquette vengée" par Ninon de Lanclos. Paris, Léopold Collin, 1805-1806, 3 vol. in-12 (3rd edit.).

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POETRY

1. EPIGRAM:

Damon, laisse juger nos yeux.

Pièces intéressantes et peu connues, 1790, viii., 105.

2. QUATRAIN TO THE GRAND PRIEUR DE VENDOME:
Insensible à tes feux, insensible à tes larmes.
BRET: *Mémoires sur la vie de Ninon de Lanclos*, 1751.

3. NO TITLE:
Qu'un vain espoir ne vienne point s'offrir.
Dictionnaire historique portatif des femmes célèbres, 1769, ii., 55 etc.

4. *Réponse à la lettre de l'autre monde* is also attributed to Ninon. It is addressed to Saint Evremond, who is said to have written *Lettre de l'autre monde.*

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320 ; 4529, fos. 8, 13, 21, 39, 42, 60, 65, 66, 77, 109, 122, 157 ; 6260, fo. 3 vo. ; 9210 ; 22873 fo. 86.

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Durga Sah Municipal Library,
Naini Tal.
दुर्गासाह म्युनिसिपल लाइब्रेरी
304
नैनीताल

INDEX

Abra de Raconis, Bishop of Lavaur, Charles-François d', 29, 97
Abra de Raconis, Family of, 28
Abra de Raconis, Olivier d', 29
Abra de Raconis, Peronne de Félins, wife of Olivier d', 29
Abra de Raconis d', 29
Aiguillon, Marie - Madeleine de Vignerod, duchesse d', 190
Albert, César - Phœbus, comte de Miossens, maréchal-duc d', 14, 99, 100, 101, 127, 165, 168, 248
Alembert, Jean Leblond d', 281
Amour Eschapé, 125
Andelot, marquis d' (see Coligny)
Annat, Père, 240
Anne of Austria, 99, 138, 139, 166, 167, 223
Argenson, René-Louis de Voyer, marquis d', 281
Aristotle, 188, 189, 195
Arnauld, Pierre-Isaac, sieur de Corbeville, 88
Arnauld, Simon, 88
Arouet, François, 214, 278, 279, 281
Arouet, François - Marie (see Voltaire)
Astrée, l', 114
Aubert, Michel, 281
Aubijoux, François d'Amboise, comte d', 80, 90, 134, 135, 150
Auchy, Charlotte des Ursins, vicomtesse d', 190
Audiguier, Vitel d', 62

Balzac, Jean-Louis Guez, sieur de, 189
Banier, Jean, 211
Bartet, Mazarin's agent, 174
Bassompière, François de Bestien, maréchal de, 54
Bautru, comte de Serrant, Guillaume de, 138
Beauregard, Madame de, 39
Belin, Jacques, 39
Bellanguerville, Jean de, 172
Benserade, Isaac de, 250
Bernier, François, 216, 217, 218, 219, 243, 268
Bernigeroth, S.M., 287
Beroalde de Verville, François, 62
Beuvron, Renée d'Epinay, marquise de, 51
Blondel, François, 171
Blot-l'Eglise, César de Chauvigny, baron de, 134
Boileau-Desprćaux, Nicolas, 19, 216, 217, 218, 219, 221, 243
Boisrobert, François Le Metel, abbé de, 138, 143, 144, 145, 147, 149, 153, 155, 161, 167, 168, 177, 250
Bollain, Anne-Marie, 167
Bondonnière, Baptiste de, 55
Bonrepaus, François d'Usson de, 221, 259, 260, 264
Bouillon, Marie - Anne Mancini, duchesse de, 250, 261
Boulay, Monsieur de, 270
Bourdaloue, Louis, 211
Bourdeille, Henri, comte de, 39, 41, 47
Bouteville, François Henri de (see Montmorency)
Brancas, Charles de Villars, comte de, 141
Bret, Antoine, 101, 204
Brunet, Père, 279
Burg, Gérard du, 200, 201, 222, 223
Bussy-Rabutin, Roger de Rabutin, comte de, 88, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 239

Canaples, Marie d'Albert Luynes, wife of Charles II., sieur de Créquy et de Canaples, 51

Candale, Louis-Charles-Gaston de La Valette, Duc de, 138
Capitan, François, 39
Castelnau, Marie de Girard, wife of Jacques, 148, 149
Caylus, Marguerite de Villette, marquise de, 179
Chabans, Louis de, sieur du Maine, 54, 55, 58, 59
Chabans, Suzanne Guillard, wife of Louis de, 55, 59, 61
Champmeslé, Marie-Desmares, wife of Charles Chevillet, sieur de, 210
Chapelle, Claude - Emmanuel Lhuillier, 143, 144, 145, 250
Charles II. of England, 264
Charles-Louis, the Raugrave, 241
Charleval, Charles Faucon du Riz, seigneur de, 127, 146, 174, 243, 271
Charron, Pierre, 132
Châteauneuf, François de Châtaigner, abbé de, 211, 235, 237, 270, 280
Chaulieu, Guillaume Amfrie, abbé de, 250, 251
Chaulne, Claude de, 59
Chavagnac, François, comte de, 69, 88, 182
Chavagnac, Gaspard, comte de, 88
Chevreau, Urbain, 141
Chevreuse, Charles de Lorraine, duc de, 44
Choiseul, Catherine-Alphonsine de Renti, comtesse de, 237
Choiseul, Claude de, 238
Christina, Queen of Sweden, 22, 168, 169, 170
Cinq-Mars, Henri Coiffier, Marquis de, 83
Clélie, 21, 125
Clérembault, Philippe, maréchal de, 261, 262
Colbert, Jean-Baptiste, 202, 221
Coligny, Gaspard III., maréchal-duc de Châtillon, 91
Coligny, Anne de Polignac, wife of Gaspard III. de, 91
Coligny, Gaspard IV., marquis d'Andelot, then duc de Châtillon, 14, 85, 88, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 101, 150
Coligny, Isabelle - Angélique de Montmorency-Bouteville, wife of Gaspard IV. of, 92, 94
Coligny, Maurice de, 92
Colombey, Emile-Laurent, 109, 171
Compagnie du Saint Sacrement, 136, 140, 164, 166, 170, 171, 195, 203
Compagnie, Jean-Baptiste, 287
Condé, Charlotte-Marguerite de Montmorency, princesse de, 88
Condé, Claire-Clémence de Maillé-Brézé, princesse de, 103
Condé, Henri II. de Bourbon, prince de, 54, 87, 103, 131, 240
Condé, Louis de Bourbon, duc d'Enghien, afterwards Prince de Condé, called Monsieur le duc, then Monsieur le Prince, 68, 87, 88, 89, 103, 104, 241
Corbinelli, Jean, 245
Corneille, Pierre, 205
Cornuel, Anne Bigot, madame, 138, 186
Cossé-Brissac, Louis de, 89
Cossette, Vicomte de, 228
Coulanges, Marie-Angélique de, 245
Coulon, Jean, 77, 78, 90, 134, 135, 136
Coulon, Marie Cornuel, wife of Jean, 78, 79, 81
Coupé, Antoine-Jean-Baptiste, 287
Créquy, Catherine de Rouge du Plessis Bellière, wife of François de Bonne, marquis de, 244
Créquy, François de Bonne, marquis de, 51, 99

Dambrun, Jean, 287
Dangeau, Louis de Courcillon, abbé de, 241
Dangeau, Philippe de Courcillon, marquis de, 180, 184, 232, 247, 280
Daumont, engraver, 287
Delpech, engraver, 288
Denise, Théodore, 235
Des Barreaux, Jacques Vallée, sieur, 82, 83, 84, 136, 143, 144, 145
Descartes, René, 17, 216
Deshoulières, Antoinette du Ligier de La Garde, dame, 250
Desmahis, Edouard de Corsembleu 281
Deveria, Achille, 287

Dorat, Claude Joseph, 281
Douxmenil, 101
Dromont, David, 205, 206
Dubois, cardinal, 261, 264
D'Urfé, 62
Duver, le sieur, 51

Effiat, Antoine Coiffier, marquis d', 213
Effiat, abbé d', 238
Elbène, Alexandre II. d', 99, 127, 147, 164, 205, 206, 207, 271
Elbène, Charlotte de La Fontaine d', 207
Elboeuf, Charles de Lorraine, duc d', 27, 28, 29
Elle, Ferdinand, 287
Elle, Louis I., called Ferdinand, 125, 270, 287
Emery, Michel Particelli, d', 78
Enghien, duc d' (see Condé)
Epicurus, 17, 26, 61, 89, 131, 267, 275
Erbaud, Monsieur d', 247
Estrée, Gabrielle d', 117
Estrée, François-Annibal, marquis de Cœuvres, maréchal-duc d', 99, 221

Faure, Pierre du, 59
Félix, Jeanne, dame du Puys, 128
Ferdinand (see Elle)
Feydeau, Marie, 160
Fontenelle, Bernard Le Bovier de, 70
Foucquet, Nicolas, 174, 185, 202
Fourreau, Léon, 186, 201, 213
Fresnoy, X. de Moresant, wife of Elie du, 239
Fumel, abbé des Roches, 239
Furetière, Antoine, 190, 204

Garnier, engraver, 288
Gassendi, Pierre, 135, 144, 216
Gaulthier, musician, 27, 28
Gedoyn, abbé Nicolas, 211, 261
Girard, Bernarde, 192
Girard, Charles, 174
Gobart, Martin, 56
Gomberville, Marin le Roy, sieur du Parc et de, 63
Gondi, Paul de (see Retz)
Gouges, Lucrèce de (see Riberolles)
Gouges, Marie de, wife of Simon Le Tellier, 38
Gouges, Marie Briant, wife of Nicolas de, 38
Gouges, Nicolas de, 38, 39, 40
Goulas, Nicolas, 80
Gournay, Marie de Jars, demoiselle de, 132
Gourville, Jean Hurault, sieur de, 184, 185, 241, 248, 265, 271, 279
Graffigny, Françoise d'Apponcourt, dame de, 287
Grammont, Antoine III., comte de Guiche, then duc de, 88, 106
Grammont, Françoise-Marguerite du Plessis-Chivre, maréchale de, 166
Grammont, Philibert, comte de, 275
Grancey, Elisabeth Rouxel de, 149
Grignan, Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné, comtesse de, 209
Grignan, Louis-Provence Adhémar de Monteil, marquis de, 287
Guerchy, Catherine du Régnier de, 165
Guiche, Armand de Grammont, comte de, 183

Hacqueville, abbé d', 238
Harcourt, Henri de Lorraine, comte de, 95
Hautefeuille, abbé de, 261
Hébenstreit, Pantaléon, 237
Henri IV., 117
Hervart, Anne d', 207, 208
Hollar, W., 288
Houssaye, Arsène, 239

Jarzé, René du Plessis de La Roche-Pichemer, marquis de, 14, 99, 100, 101
Juvenel, Félix de, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 203

La Bazinière, Françoise de Barbézières, wife of Macé Bertrand, sieur de, 164
La Beaumelle, Laurent-Angliviel de, 239
La Boétie, Etienne de, 132
La Bruyère, Jean de, 281
La Calprenède, Gaucher de Coste, sieur de, 109, 110

Lacger, Hercule de, sieur de Massuguiez, 142
La Chastre, Louis, marquis de, 181
La Croix, Françoise du Charme, wife of Antoine de, 49, 51, 53
La Fare, marquis de, 180, 220, 221, 222, 232, 250, 256
La Fayette, Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne, comtesse de, 183, 210, 221, 244
La Ferté, Madeleine d'Angennes de La Loupe, maréchale de, 149, 244
La Feuillade, Charlotte Gouffier, duchesse de, 251, 252, 255
La Fontaine, Jean de, 217, 221, 243, 250
La Harpe, François de, 281
Laine, engraver, 287
La Loubère, Simon de, 261, 270
La Mesnardière, Jules-Pilet de, 141
La Moussaye, Amaury Goyon, marquis de, 93
La Nauve, Samuel de, 52
Lanclos, Charles de, 29
Lanclos, Henri de, 11, 13, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, 61, 63, 64, 65, 67, 68, 71, 72, 73, 74, 95, 130
Lanclos, Léonor de, 29
Lanclos, Marie-Barbe de La Marche, wife of Henri de, 11, 28, 29, 32, 33, 35, 36, 38, 61, 62, 63, 65, 67, 68, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74
Lanclos, Anne, called Ninon, passim
Lange, François, 214
La Roche, abbé de, 287
La Roche, Madame de, 239
La Rochefoucauld, François VI., duc de, 19, 152, 184, 185, 211, 234, 243, 266
La Sablière, Madame de (see Rambouillet)
La Salle, Marguerite de Lessan, wife of Antoine de, 49, 51, 53
Lassay, Armand de Madaillan de Lesparre, 258
La Suze, Henriette de Coligny, comtesse de, 142, 186, 187, 276
Lauzun, Antoine Nompar de Caumont, duc de, 242
La Villette, Madame de, 249
Le Brun, Charles, 171, 250
Leckzinska, Marie, 281
Lémon, Marguerite, 288
Le Moyne, Charles, 58
Le Nôtre, André, 250
Le Sage, Alain René, 181
Lesclache, Louis de, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 194, 195, 198, 203
Lesdiguières, Jean-Paul-François, duc de, 238
Le Tellier, Simon, sieur du Pavillon, 39, 41, 42, 49
Leuville, Anne Morant, marquise de, 244
Lhuillier, François, 135
Longueville, Anne-Genevieve de Bourbon, duchesse de, 211
Longueville, Henri d'Orléans, duc de, 152
Loret, Jean, 139
Lorme, Jean de Lon, baron de Baye et seigneur de, 82
Lorme, Marie de Lon, called Marion de Lorme, 13, 69, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 130, 175
Louis XIV., 17, 22, 149, 169, 170, 239, 240, 247
Louis-Philippe, 228
Louvigny, Madeleine-Charlotte Bouvet de, 290
Louvois, François-Michel Le Tellier, marquis de, 239
Lully, Jean-Baptiste, 242
Luynes, Charles-Philippe, duc de, 101, 269

Maintenon, Françoise d'Aubigné, marquise de, 13, 17, 19, 150, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 226, 248, 249, 289, 290
Maizeaux, Pierre de, 174
Malhan, André de Buridan, sieur de, 137, 138
Malherbe, François de, 20, 54, 101
Mansart, Jules Hardouin, 171, 172, 250
Marchand, Madame, 49
Maréchal, Madame, 189
Marguerite, Ninon's cook, 224, 278
Marguerite de Navarre, 62
Marsillac, Henri de La Rochefoucauld, abbé de, 244
Marsilly, Antoine Deschamps, marquis de, 179
Masquelier, Louis-Joseph, 287

Maugin, Anne, 56, 57
Maupéou, Charles de, 160
Maupéou, Pierre de, 160
Mazarin, Hortense Mancini, duchesse de, 263, 265
Mazarin, Cardinal Jules, 106, 110, 152, 174, 185
Méré, Antoine Gombaud, chevalier de, 14, 99, 100, 101, 129, 164, 253, 254, 255
Mignard, Pierre, 125, 171, 217, 236, 242, 287, 288
Miossens, César-Phœbus, comte de (see Albert)
Mitton Damien, 135
Molière, Jean-Baptiste-Pocquelin, called Molière, 19, 21, 195, 198, 199, 200, 202, 203, 204, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 248
Mollier, Louis de, 36
Mondion, Louis de, 223
Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de, 16, 18, 37, 127, 132, 152, 156, 188, 214, 272, 275
Montchevreuil, Henri de Mornay, marquis de, 179
Montmor, Henri-Louis Habert, seigneur de, 129
Montmorency, Henri, duc de, 54
Montmorency-Bouteville, Elisabeth, comtesse de, 92
Montmorency-Bouteville, Isabelle-Angélique, 92, 94
Montmorency-Bouteville, François-Henri de, afterwards duc de Luxembourg, 88
Montpensier, Anne-Marie-Louise d'Orléans, duchesse de, 187
Montplaisir, René de Bruc, marquis de, 187
Montrésor, Claude de Bourdeille, comte de, 151
Moreau, Michel-Gerôme, 135, 136, 150
Morelli, physician, 269
Morin, J., 288
Mornay, Louis-François de, son of Ninon and the marquis de Villarceaux, 15, 156, 172, 173, 214, 221, 222, 259, 272
Mornay, Madame de, 290
Mortémar, Gabriel de Rochechouart, marquis de, 138
Motteville, Françoise Bertaut, présidente de, 169
Musnier, Claude, 56

Nancrée, Madame de, 280
Navailles, Philippe de Montaut-Bénac, comte de, 106, 107
Nevers, Marie-Louise de Gonzague, duchesse de, 84
Noctambule, 66
Noirmoutiers, Louis de La Trémouille, duc de, 242
Nouveau, Jérôme de, 149

Olier, Catherine Pecquet, wife of Nicolas Ferdinand, 245, 280
Olier, Jean-Jacques, 136, 137, 138, 153
Olonne, Catherine-Henriette d'Angennes de La Loupe, comtesse d', 161 244
Orléans, Charles-Paris, d', 211
Orléans, Charlotte-Elizabeth, duchesse d', 17, 212, 232, 241
Orléans, Gaston, duc d', 71, 80, 99
Orléans, Henriette d'Angleterre, duchesse d', 183, 217
Orléans, Père Joseph d', 277
Orléans Philippe, duc d', 241

Palluau, Philippe de Clérembault, comte de, 99, 261, 262
Pascal, Blaise, 190, 252
Pécour, Guillaume-Louis, 204, 205
Pérachon, Marc-Antoine, 115, 116
Petit, Angélique, 125, 126
Petitot, Jean, 287
Petot, abbé, 240
Picot, musician, 135
Piis, Auguste de, 281
Pinssio, Sebastiano, 287
Pisani, Léon-Pompée d'Angennes, marquis de, 88
Polignac, Anne de (see Coligny)
Pomme de Pin, 67
Pomponne, Simon-Arnault, marquis de, 242
Pons, abbé de, 203
Poron, Marie, 279
Poron, Pierre, 279
Potel, Sebastien, 135
Pradon, Nicolas, 250

INDEX

Précieuses, 20, 186, 189, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 202
Pure, Michel de, 113
Pyrrhon, 131

Rabelais, François, 62
Racine, Jean, 210, 221
Raincy, Jacques Bordier, sieur du, 135
Rambouillet, Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de, 20, 88
Rambouillet, Hôtel de, 17, 20, 89, 193
Rambouillet, Antoine de, sieur de La Sablière, 101, 122, 142, 215,
Rambouillet, Marguerite Hessien, wife of Antoine d', 19, 101, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 239, 256, 257, 258, 259, 269, 271
Raoux, Jean, 287
Raré, Henri de Lancy, chevalier de, 13, 71, 72, 74
Raré, Nicholas de Lancy, baron de, 71
Regnier - Desmarais, François - Séraphin de, 243
Rehbinder, comte de, 287
Rémond, le grec (see Saint-Marc)
Retz, Jean-François-Paul, cardinal, 95, 152
Riberolles, Germain de, 55
Riberolles, Jean de, 39, 40, 41, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 57, 68, 60
Riberolles, Lucrèce de Gouges, wife of Jean de, 38, 39, 40, 41, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 57, 58, 60
Riberolles, Nicolas de, 55
Richelieu, Alphonse du Plessis, cardinal de, 112, 113, 114, 129
Richelieu, Armand du Plessis, cardinal de, 69, 70, 97, 103, 113, 151,
Rohan-Chabot, Henri duc de, de Chabot, 89
Rohan-Chabot, Marguerite de Rohan, duchesse de, 89
Rohan, Marguerite de Bethune, duchesse de, 99
Rosny, Françoise de Créquy, wife of Maximilien de Bethune, marquis de, 51
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 18, 281
Roussillon, Nicolas de Chagny, comte de, 88
Roye, Frédéric-Charles de La Rochefoucauld, comte de, 213
Ruvigny, Henri de Massuez, 242, 269

Saint-Aignan, François de Beauvilliers, duc de, 187
Saint-Albans, Duke of, 267
Saint-Beuve, 18
Saint-Cyr, convent of, 289, 290
Saint-Etienne, Charles-Claude de Beaumont, Vicomte de Chaumusy, sieur de, 12, 67, 68, 69, 70
Saint-Evremond, Charles-Marguetel de Saint-Denis, seigneur de, 15, 19, 88, 130, 131, 163, 164, 174, 180, 181, 202, 206, 207, 208, 212, 214, 244, 249, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 272, 275, 276
Saint-Ibar, Henri d'Escarts, sieur de, 151
Saint-Luc, Timoléon d'Epinay, maréchal de, 29, 30
Saint-Marc, Rémond de, 235, 236
Saint-Pavin, Denis Sanguin, abbé de, 143, 144, 145, 183
Saint-Simon, Louis de Rouvroy, duc de, 103, 179, 231, 238, 249
Saint-Suzanne, 62
Sablière, Madame de La (see Rambouillet)
Sachiez, Guillaume, 228
Sallenove, mademoiselle de, 68
Sandwich, Duchess of, 22, 23, 269, 287
Sarasin, Jean-François, 89
Scarron, Madame (see Maintenon)
Scarron, Paul, 19, 85, 135, 149, 171, 175, 177, 178, 180
Schmidt, G. F., 287
Schomberg, Henri, maréchal de, 54
Schouvalow, comte Ivan de, 281
Scudéry, Madeleine de, 20, 21, 109, 125, 126, 186, 251, 252, 260
Segrais, Jean Regnault de, 69
Seneca, 272, 273, 274, 275
Senecé, Marie-Catherine de La Rochefoucauld-Rendan, marquis de, 166
Ségur, Vicomte de, 232

INDEX

Sévigné, Charles de, 22, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212
Sévigné, Henri, marquis de, 118, 119, 120, 121, 230
Sévigné, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, wife of Henri, marquis de, 118, 119, 120, 121, 209, 210, 211, 238, 245, 258
Sinclair, Sir Tollemache, 288
Soissons, Louis de Bourbon, comte de, 151
Somaize, Antoine Baudeau de, 124, 125, 171, 200
Sorel, Charles, 62
Sourches, Louis - François de Bouchet, marquis de, 280
Sparre, comtesse de, 169
Spencer, Lord, 288
Strafford, Lady, 24
Syfang, engraver, 287

Tallard, Camille d'Hostun, duc de, 242, 269
Tallemant, abbé François, 141, 224
Tallemant des Réaux, Gédéon, 69, 78, 89, 101, 124, 125, 127, 179, 186, 203, 217
Tambonneau, Michel, 136
Taphanel, Achille, 288
Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste, 288
Terrasson, abbé Jean, 281
Testu, abbé, 238, 277
Thévenin, François, 153
Tôt, Madame du, 238
Tourneil, Jacques de, 235
Tournon, Just-Louis, comte de, 59
Trianon-La Grange, abbé de, 279
Troisville, Henri-Joseph de Peyre, called abbé de, 261
Turgis, Louis, 56
Turretini, Jean-Alphonse, 269, 270

Valliquierville, Charles de, 151, 152, 156, 161, 162, 172, 173
Vandyck, 288
Vardes, François-René du Bec-Crespin, marquis de, 99
Vassé, Henri-François, marquis de, 121, 122, 123
Vaubecourt, Catherine Amelot de Gournay, comtesse de, 281
Vendôme, Alexandre, chevalier de, 116, 117, 118
Vendôme, César, duc de, 251
Vendôme, Françoise de Lorraine, duchesse de, 166
Vendôme, Grand-Prieur de, 251
Viau, Théophile de, 82, 144
Viété, Jean, 160
Vigean, François II. Poussart, marquis de Fors du, 88, 174
Vigean, X. de Fors du, 88
Vigean, Marthe du, 103
Villarceaux, Charles de Mornay, Marquis de, 290
Villarceaux, Dénise de La Fontaine d'Esche, wife of Louis Mornay, marquis de Villarceaux, 149, 155, 156, 157, 159, 272
Villarceaux, Louis de Mornay, marquis de, 14, 15, 147, 148, 149, 150, 153, 154, 155, 156, 158, 159, 160, 162, 164, 168, 172, 176, 177 178, 179, 180, 181, 226, 272, 289, 290, 291
Villarceaux, René de Mornay de, abbé de Saint - Quentin - les - Beauvais, 161
Villars, Pierre de, 109, 110, 111
Villedieu, Marie - Catherine des Jardins, called Madame de, 185
Villiers, chevalier de, 101
Villotret, Anne de, 31
Villotret, Nicholas de, 31
Visconti, Jean-Baptiste Primi, 179
Vivonne, Louis-Victor de Rochechouart, duc de, 174, 242, 251
Voiture, Vincent, 89, 189
Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet, called, 211, 214, 231, 232, 278, 279, 281

Walpole, Horace, 23, 281

Yveteaux, Nicolas Vauquelin, sieur des, 127, 271

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